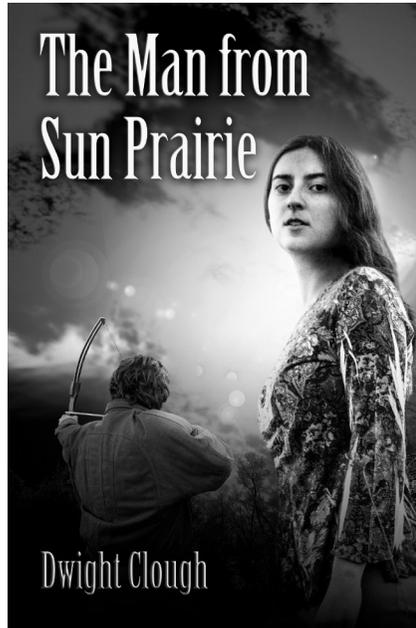


The Man from Sun Prairie

Dwight Clough

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This is not exactly a true story



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The Man from Sun Prairie

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*To the good people of Sun Prairie,
most particularly,
to the members of my family
who made Sun Prairie
our home*

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Chapter 1

The first thing you need to know is that I'm fifty percent Native American.

I know. I know. You're gonna ask, "What nation? What tribe?"

Here's the embarrassing part. *I don't really know.* There, I said it. I don't know. I can't help it that my grandparents pretended to be English when everybody knew that they were descendants of the red man. So I need to go with my best guess, and I'm thinking it can't be Ho Chunk because they run a huge casino right in the middle of Wisconsin, and I can't be related to that. I'm feeling like it's more Sioux or one of those tribes that hunted buffalo only for the meat and the hide until the white man came along and slaughtered them by the millions. The buffalo. Well, and probably my ancestors too, which helps to explain why my grandparents claimed to be English. It was a kind of do-it-yourself witness protection program back in the early part of the twentieth century.

So I can't blame them, but it does leave us with a mystery. I don't know what tribe I am.

I lived with my grandparents for a while, and they liked me, I think, because they gave me their house and their money when they died.

When I got the money, I didn't waste one minute. I went straight down to the courthouse and had my name changed from Doug Johnson to Straight Arrow. I wanted to honor my

ancestors, and I figured the time for witness protection was over.

I used the leftover money to get set up in the arrowhead business. It works out nice because my grandparents' house—actually my house now—is right on Main Street, and it's zoned commercial so I can sell anything I want any time I want right off my front porch. I put up a big hand painted sign that said "Indian Arrowheads." The City gave me grief about it, but, hey, they zoned it. It's not my fault they zoned my house commercial.

So you can buy arrowheads from me just about anytime except when I clean the bowling alley in Madison. I'm just doing that temporarily to pay the property taxes and buy a little food and gas for the car. Besides, I don't get a lot of arrowhead traffic between 3:00 am and 8:00 am, so the job really doesn't interfere with my business.

Of course, there's a lot more to me than just arrowheads. I do have a romantic side. But it's very focused. In fact, I only have eyes for one woman. Her name is Dove Fogico. I think she might be Native American also, although she says she's German, French and Swiss. I don't know. I guess it doesn't matter, but everybody says she looks like Jacqueline Kennedy.

I never met Jacqueline Kennedy, so I couldn't really say. She was the wife of a president, and they had kids who played in the White House and then grew up.

Anyway, Dove comes by the shop every so often and buys an arrowhead. Most people who buy arrowheads are either archaeologists, archers or regulars on the flea market circuit. I don't think Dove is any of those things, but she comes by anyway and shops around for a long time before she buys.

I think you could say she's my most regular customer.

She comes by and always stops to strum the piano on the porch. I forgot to tell you about that. I had this old piano. I mean it was the genuine article—ivory and ebony keys—none of this plastic stuff. But my nieces and nephews always liked to come over and bang on it, and, well, for some reason, they thought it was fun to tear the ivory off the keys. (Don't tell anybody. I don't want their parents to know. No point getting the kiddos in trouble over a little thing like a piano.) Anyway, one day the kids were over, and I had a crowbar in my hand, and we decided to tear the piano apart because it looked like fun, and then we got down to the soundboard, and I just didn't have the heart to tear it apart any more. Call me soft. I put most of the piano out in the strawberry patch where a feral cat had two litters of kittens before being adopted by the neighbors and surgically altered to take away the possibility of motherhood. I left the soundboard on the porch, partly because it's too heavy to move, and partly because it makes for a nice doorbell.

So Dove strums on the piano, and I come out and offer her a free Snapple. Somebody gave me like two hundred of these raspberry iced tea Snapples in exchange for a boatload of arrowheads—yeah, I know, probably not the smartest business decision, especially since I don't even like iced tea, but Dove does, so it all works out.

We talk about all kinds of things. Even though she calls me Crazy Horse, Dove is real easy to talk to. I like that because sometimes it's hard to figure out what to say when you're in the presence of a beautiful woman. But she acts like a regular person, so we just talk.

One day we were sitting on the porch together watching the leaves change color and talking about Alaska and the polar vortex, when I just really wanted to lean over and kiss her on the cheek.

I didn't, of course, because I haven't even told her that I like her.

But I plan to. It's on my to do list.

Should I tell her that I like her before the president comes or after? It's a hard decision. If I tell her before the president comes to Sun Prairie, then she might just get swept away in the excitement and decide to like me too. It could improve my chances. On the other hand, if I tell her while we're all getting geared up for the president to pin the Medal of Honor on my next door neighbor who's about to die from war wounds he got in Afghanistan—well, I don't know. Maybe she would be distracted.

She acts distracted sometimes. But mainly she's really, really nice.

You would probably like her too if you knew her, but, hey, I got here first.

By the way, I did go and visit my neighbor after he got into hospice. I didn't really know what to say because I've never gone to war and I've never died before, so I just prayed for him and gave him my favorite arrowhead.

I think he liked it because he was crying, and I was crying a little bit, and he said he would always treasure it.

He's a good kid. Wrestled for the Sun Prairie Cardinals. Went to state I think. So it's hard to see him now, all broken down. But I guess we all end up there sooner or later. Broken down. Like an old rusted out car that you keep taking back to the mechanic, but he can never fix it good as new.

My neighbor got cheated out of life. When I think about it, it makes me cry.

But the president is coming, and that should cheer everybody up, even if you didn't vote for him. I hope he doesn't notice that I don't have his bumper sticker on my car.

I don't like bumper stickers. They seem angry to me. The more bumper stickers—the more anger. And who wants that?

I guess some people do, because some people, especially around Madison have lots and lots of bumper stickers, and they say things like COEXIST, only they use religious signs, and I wonder who they're talking to.

I guess I don't wonder. I think I know.

So the president is coming, and because there's so much anger floating around, he has like a whole army to make sure that nobody—especially those who don't have his bumper sticker—tries to kill him.

So they came over and talked to me two or three times. By "they" I mean the Secret Service or the FBI or some kind of government men in black.

I offered them a free arrowhead, but they declined.

They also didn't like my idea of putting a table of arrowheads out in front of my house to sell to the passing throng while the president makes his visit. Too bad, because I thought it was a wonderful commercial opportunity.

I think they want me to keep a low profile, so I'm doing that. But I refused to take down my hand painted sign, "Indian Arrowheads." Hey, this is my business, you know.

I guess that's all for now. I need to go haul a couple hundred pounds of trash out to the dumpster, swab a dozen toilets, mop ten thousand square feet of floor, vacuum a couple miles of carpet and remove a pile of dirty fingerprints from the door.

Did I tell you that one night I broke in on some guys that were breaking in on the bowling alley? I guess they didn't expect to see a guy swinging a mop at three o'clock in the morning, and I was too stupid to even be scared. I was just trying to figure out why there were broken ceiling tiles all over the floor. Meanwhile, they were busy skedaddling back up onto the roof and down the ladder to the back parking lot. After that night, I always drive around the back lot and check for ladders before I go inside. You can't be too careful you know.

Chapter 2

Okay, this is gonna sound a little sketchy. I'm telling you up front, just so you know.

Yes, the president came to Sun Prairie. It was crazy. Black cars all over the place. It looked like a cross between a parade and a funeral. The Sun Prairie Police were there, and the Dane County Sheriff's Deputies, and the Madison Police. Sirens everywhere. And lots of bumper stickers too. Lots and lots of bumper stickers. I hear tell that they made the Ammo Box close its doors even though they were at least fourteen blocks away. Just to be fair, they told Wal-Mart to move all their guns and ammo to the back room and lock it up. I know that because my nephew works there.

Everybody wanted to see the president. Channel 15 had a van parked right in front of my house (blocking my sign), and of course Fox 47, and 27 and 3 and a few radio stations. Plus I think CNN was there, and who knows. Some guy told me he was an AP photographer. I told him about my collection, but he wasn't interested. It was worth a try, you know. A little free publicity never hurt anybody.

A guy in a suit with one of those curly telephone cords going into his ear walked into my house without even knocking. Maybe it was the arrowhead sign. I didn't ask him what was in the case he was carrying. You know very well he was carrying an Uzi or some other weapon of mass destruction designed to mow down a whole herd of assassins in about five bullet-spitting seconds. Two more men in black were in my yard. They

didn't ask permission either; they just moved in. No problem. I figured these guys wouldn't steal any arrowheads since I already tried to give 'em some and they turned me down. Plus, with a Secret Service guy in my shop and two more in my yard, nobody would dare steal anything.

So I put two folding chairs out in my yard—the blue striped one for me, and the pink flowered one for Dove (in case she came by, which she did). We sat there. She drank her Snapple iced tea, and I was sipping on a Sprecher's Root Beer in a chilled mug.

“I shoulda grilled some brats,” I said. I keep a giant maple tree in my back yard that throws branches at the ground every time it storms, and grilling Johnsonville Bratwursts is the best way I can think of to get rid of all those excess branches. But since the presidential limousine just pulled up, I figured it would probably be a bad time to start a fire in the back yard. People get touchy about things like that, especially people wearing dark suits and toting Uzis in their carry on luggage.

Dove nodded as though she had followed everything I was thinking. That's one thing I like about Dove. I always feel like she's right there with me.

What I couldn't understand at first is why the dark suit inside my house chose that moment to step outside. It didn't quite make sense. I mean weren't they playing zone defense? I don't know. I'm not a Secret Service Agent, nor am I a basketball player, but let me say it struck me as strange.

But sometimes the world is just odd like that, so you lean back, take it all in, and move on.

The man in black walked up to the press line as though he was looking for someone. Everybody seemed to be ignoring him. The press and all the people were looking at the limousine

waiting for the president to step out. The Secret Service guys were looking at everyone but the president.

But somehow, nobody was looking at my guy, and so nobody noticed when he set his bag down next to a camera operator, stood up on his tiptoes to get a look at the president, and then turned and walked away.

Without his bag.

The Boston Marathon. The president. The crowds. This was a bomb.

I looked at Dove.

She understood. We both understood what I had to do.

When I was a child, we lived on a dirt road in North Carolina. Bill lived across the street. Even though he was only six, he was already a chain smoker like his parents. His rottweiler followed him and his trail of smoke around wherever he went.

I didn't like his rottweiler. I liked Bill just fine, but the dog I could do without.

And so I decided to inform the animal. I held a small stick in my hand, looked the canine in the eyes and commanded, "Git."

The first time, he ignored me.

So I stepped a little closer. "Git!"

This was not okay with the rottweiler. The deep growl that came from his throat shocked me, and I think it surprised Bill. Then he sprang.

"Run," Bill cried, powerless to restrain the beast.

I didn't need any prodding from Bill. Seconds earlier, the back door to my home was a few comfortable steps away. Any illusion of safety was stripped away as I tried to squeeze through

time and space to make it to that impossibly small door a thousand miles away.

It was like that when I ran for the bag. The atmosphere clung to me thick and heavy, forcing me to swim through it. Hands reached for me, but I pushed them away as I grabbed the handles and started for the fence behind my home.

The hole in the fence was a subject of some dispute between the school district and me. They claimed it was on my land, therefore, I needed to repair the breach. I said that was crazy. Their fence—their repair. It was cut and dried: their problem. Maybe it was one of those deals where they wouldn't fix it because of the principle of the thing, but the hole remained, and, because of it, a few kids managed to sneak into the football games for free.

Squeeze through the fence. Get the bomb to the middle of Ashley Field. Maybe nobody would be killed. Except, quite possibly, me.

People were hollering, but their voices seemed far away. I think someone said, "Freeze." I think someone said, "I'll shoot." But I kept running.

The fence, like the backdoor when I ran from the rottweiler, seemed a million miles away.

I heard thunder. A blinding flash.

The fence turned gray, then all things were black.

Chapter 3

“State your loyalty,” a man’s voice said.

“My husband is loyal to the Crown.” I heard a woman’s voice say that. No, wait, not just any woman. It was Dove. Her husband was loyal to the Crown.

What crown?

It was Dove. Her husband was loyal to the Crown.

Husband? What husband?

I opened my eyes. The world spun.

The Secret Service agent was wearing chain mail and plate armor and a helmet.

“State your loyalty,” he said again.

You can’t study for an exam like this. This was definitely a trick question, and I was pretty sure there were no right answers. Were we in Guantanamo Bay? How did I get here?

The Secret Service Knight didn’t like how long it took me to answer. He grabbed my shirt and hauled me to my feet. He was shorter than me, but very strong. He held my 180 pounds as easily as I would hold a baseball.

“State your loyalty!” he demanded.

Should I say Republican or Democrat? He’s probably mad because I didn’t have the president’s bumper sticker on my car.

Does he have my voting records? What happens if I answer wrong?

Dove's voice broke in. "Good sir, my husband was poisoned by the Goraudok assassins. His mind is in a fog. He will need time to break from their spell. But I assure you, he is loyal to the Crown."

Mr. Strong Man dropped me like a sack of onions. I fell back to the ground. I tried to sit up, but the forest was spinning. My head hurt.

He turned to Dove. "Goraudok assassins?"

"Three days ago. We blundered into their camp. It was about a day's march east."

Our interrogator shook his helmeted head. "Their camp will disappear. They're very hard to track. How many were there?"

"Five, maybe six that we saw. Could be more."

Wow. Dove was acting like she lied for a living. She could run for office. I was actually starting to get interested. I never knew Guantanamo Bay would be like this.

Mr. Questions whistled. "You're trying to tell me that the two of you took on six Goraudok assassins?"

Dove chuckled. "Good sir, my husband is an archer, but we would never be that foolish. Entering their camp was a mistake. Why they didn't set a watch, I don't know. Our horses tread softly on the pine needle floor."

I started to feel the need to take notes. If this was my cover story, then I ought to know it. *But what happened to the bomb? Did it go off? Why wasn't I injured? Did they disable it? How did I get here?*

"Where am I?" My voice cracked and croaked.

Dove answered. "Rest easy, Husband. You are in the Kingdom of Arken."

"We're not in Guantanamo Bay?" I cackled.

Dove laughed. "The poison has taken his mind. But he should be clear in a couple hours. I have worked as an herbalist and a healer. I've seen this before." Then she turned to me, and patted my hand.

The moment she touched my hand, a voice filled the forest. "Stay quiet, son. Follow Dove's lead."

"Huh?" I looked around. But the voice was gone.

I looked at Mr. Armor, but he didn't react. It was as though he hadn't heard a thing. I looked at Dove.

She smiled at me, and turned back to our Inquisitor. "Good sir, you are knight of Arken. You deserve a full explanation. Let me tell you everything that happened. Our horses reacted before we did. They took off at a full gallop. If they had not, we would both certainly be dead."

I nodded. It seemed like the right thing to do.

Dove continued, "I can only credit the mercy of God that their crossbows were unstrung. Only one arrow reached us. I knew the barbs were poison, as did my husband. It struck my husband's horse. In our haste to remove it, my husband grazed his hand. Barely a scratch, but as you know the Goraudok poison is strong. Our horse fell. We continued on for an hour on my gelding, but we could hear our pursuers behind us. To throw them off track, we abandoned my horse an hour before sunset. The horse ran north along the banks of the River Harmon. We forded the river and walked west all night. By morning, the poison had taken my husband. We've been here ever since. I've been treating him with herbal teas, but time is the real healer."

I hate tea.

“What are your names?” the knight asked.

“My husband’s name is Straight Arrow. And I am Dove Fogico.” She bowed when she said that.

Okay. She gave away our names. If this is witness protection, we’re not off to a very good start. On the other hand, I don’t need to memorize new names. What I can’t figure out is how we got married. I was dying to ask, but it didn’t seem like a good idea with Mr. Nosey standing right there.

“I am Lord Cedric,” the knight said. “I will take you to the king. There we will pass judgment on your account. If there are Goraudok assassins in the forest, the king’s party must be alerted. If, however, you are spies, you will die.”

Friendly place.

Cedric hauled me to my feet again. I took a wobbly step forward and sank to my knees. “You will ride,” he said motioning to a vehicle of some sort behind me.

Transportation. This is a good thing. I hoped it would be a car native to America, like a Buick. My grandfather always said it wasn’t a real car if it wasn’t a Buick.

I turned around. No, it wasn’t a Buick. Not even close. It was the largest horse I had ever seen, and he (or she—I didn’t check) was dressed just like Mr. Cedric, armor and all.

Oh.

Here we come to an embarrassing moment. I know my ancestors tamed the wild Mustangs of the plains, and rode into battle with tomahawks, bows and arrows. But I’ve never successfully ridden a horse. Actually, I’m a little scared of them.

Sorry to disappoint you.

I was trying to figure out how to tell this guy that I didn't know how to ride horses, when he picked me up and threw me over his shoulders like I was a spare jacket.

Help! I mouthed silently to Dove as she grew smaller and smaller.

Dove smiled.

Then Cedric yelled over his shoulder, "Do you think he can sit up?"

"He will be fine," Dove called back.

Cedric plopped me into the saddle. I'm not going to go into the details, but let's just say it was not a comfortable landing. Ouch!

I looked down. The ground looked far away, and my head was still swimming. I grabbed the horse's mane and squeezed until my knuckles turned white. Then I noticed my clothes. I mean one minute I'm running through my yard in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin carrying a bomb in a case, wearing blue jeans, a flannel shirt and sneakers. The next minute I'm in Middle Earth or Narnia or The Princess Bride wearing knee high leather boots, a jacket made of some kind of animal hide, an olive green cotton shirt and light brown trousers. "How did I get into these?" I mumbled but nobody paid any attention.

"I will carry your weapons," the knight announced.

What weapons? We have weapons?

Cedric picked up a longbow and a quiver full of arrows.

Oh, yeah. Dove said I was an archer. But that's a lie. I'm not an archer. I sell arrowheads. I don't shoot them. This could get really unpleasant, I said to myself. What if they ask me to shoot an arrow at a target? I couldn't hit a bull's eye—I couldn't even hit the target if I was standing over it. But what if they test me?

Visions of shooting an apple off Dove's head at 50 paces came to my mind. Just like William Tell. But I'm not William Tell. What if they test me? Then I started laughing out loud. So what if they do test me? All I would need to do is aim for Dove. No way I'd ever hit her. I'd probably shoot myself in the foot.

Cedric's voice brought me back to reality—assuming this is reality.

“This is an odd parcel,” he said. Then he lifted up the case containing the bomb.

I froze.

Boston Marathon. Sun Prairie bomb. Kill-the-president device. Weapon of mass destruction. C4 and ball bearings with a clock and wires. Ticking away, all the while we were talking, lying in wait, ready to kill us all.

My mouth was open but no words were coming out. I was willing my body to move, but my muscles weren't responding. I don't like these kinds of nightmares. At least let me move.

Dove lightly snatched the bomb away from Armored Truck Man. “It's harmless,” she said in a cheery voice. “A woman needs a bag to keep her things.” Then she looked at me and said, “Now that all has been disarmed; let's go meet the king.”

My cousin once spent three days in a coma. When he came out of it, he thought he was on a job interview at Quiznos. He couldn't quite figure out why they would need to do an EEG just to qualify him for selling submarine sandwiches, but he went along with the flow.

Now I know how he felt.

Chapter 4

I'm not sure how Dove got Cedric talking about himself, but she did. She's good at stuff like that. Like my grandma used to be. Grandma used to fry catfish and taters, boil corn, bake bread and brew coffee. Then she set it before her family and friends, and faded into the background, putting everybody else on center stage. She was invisible. Like the angels.

I miss my grandma.

Anyway, Mr. Cedric told us all about his horse, Manford, his horse's mother and father, his horse's maiden aunt and distant cousins. He was tight lipped about his mission, his armor and his training. But he did let slip that he once killed fifty armored men in a single battle all by himself. He also captured a half dozen spies and saw to it that they were hung.

Just to keep the conversation flowing, I told him that my life-long goal was to set up a national monument in Arlington Cemetery: The Tomb of the Unknown Indian. I threw that out there, but it didn't seem to work up any traction, so I handed the reins of the conversation back to Dove.

She quickly changed the subject.

I guess I should mention that we passed a couple of other metal men just like Cedric. Like our guy, they had arms like tree trunks, but they didn't talk much. I guess they're too busy doing push ups.

After a while my head cleared, and my anatomy got pretty sore, so we managed to talk Cedric into riding and letting me walk. That was a relief.

I really needed to get Dove by herself so I could ask her some questions. Why wasn't the bomb going off? Were we really married? How did that happen without me knowing about it? How did I get here? And where is here, exactly? And how are we going to get home? But when I tried to whisper something to Dove, Cedric's voice boomed at us: "Speak plainly, Straight Arrow, so all of us can hear."

Hmm.

They say every twenty minutes there's a lull in a conversation—unless you're talking to me, in which case I can get to the lulls a lot quicker—but anyway, I timed it once when I was at a party, and it comes out to be twenty minutes almost to the second.

We were in a lull in the conversation, and Dove decided to start singing. It was some song about a flower that grows on the Arken hills and a princess that found that flower and brought it home. I had never heard that song before but Cedric seemed to enjoy it. I'm not sure because I wasn't looking right at him, but I think he actually took off one of his gloves and wiped a tear from his eyes.

Dove has a pretty voice. I mean it's not American Idol material, but it's good enough to sing a child to sleep, in the same league as Katniss Everdeen of *Hunger Games*, only I think better. So I like to listen to her sing, but I don't sing along, because ... well, I just don't.

I'm not a singer. We sorted that out way back in elementary school when they were dividing the songbirds between blue birds and sparrows. They created a special category for me: the bat. While the blue birds and sparrows did their thing, I joined

the janitor out in the hallway and used my talent for echolocation to help him and his dust mop find the dirt. He was a great guy, about 150 years old, and he had a hearing aid in one of his giant hairy ears. We went from one end of the school to the other looking for dirt. It was loads of fun, but I noticed that all the teachers closed their classroom doors.

Our march through the forest had a dreamlike quality to it—the morning sun filtering through the trees, the quiet gurgle of a brook nearby, Dove’s beautiful voice. I was starting to relax and enjoy this place—whatever or wherever it is, when Dove suddenly screamed, “Cedric! Stop!”

Before I even knew what was going on, she had dropped the Boston Marathon bomb, picked up a stick and raked it through the fallen leaves. Her sweeping motion dredged up a snake in the process of striking, and catapulted him ten yards or so away from the horse.

Cedric was a blur of motion. I don’t know how someone that stout can move so quickly, but he was off the horse, his sword was drawn, and advancing against the serpent before I could quite take in what was happening.

Then I noticed that the horse’s reins were in my hand. I noticed because the 2,000-pound Clydesdale was making those horse noises that let you know that he’s about to have a full-fledged panic attack that will result in one of his hooves being buried in my chest after he lifts me fifteen feet off the ground. I knew from watching Cesar Millan that I needed to be the alpha horse right now, but, for the life of me, I couldn’t remember how to do it. “Nice horsey,” I squeaked three or four times, but it didn’t seem to be helping.

Meanwhile, Cedric’s blade was a blur. He picked up the severed snake head with a gloved hand while the rest of the animal’s body writhed on the ground. “A viper,” he said. “Very danger-

ous. Enough venom to kill twenty men.” He tossed the snake head aside and turned to us. “Sweep the area,” he said. “There may be more.”

Jittery Manford seemed to calm down when he heard his master’s voice. And Cedric took back the reins so I went looking for a stick. If I’m going to hunt this world’s version of a rattlesnake, I wanted a good stick in my hand.

With sticks in our hands and a sword in Cedric’s, we searched the area. No snakes.

When Cedric returned to his saddle, he said, “You showed great courage, Dove Fogico. I owe you a debt of gratitude. That snake would have crippled my horse or worse. I will not forget what you have done.”

I once saw a cow that had been bitten by a rattlesnake right on the milk factory. It was not a pretty sight.

Even though I’m fifty percent Indian—by the way I know it’s not politically correct to say “Indian,” but I say it anyway because it reminds me that the white man is never as smart as he thinks he is. You probably know the story. Christopher Columbus or some such explorer got here and thought he had found a shortcut to India or the Indies or whatever. Anyway, my point is: He was confused. So he looks at the rightful owners of North America and calls them “Indians.” So in my mind, whenever somebody gets cocky about how much they think they know, I just think *Indian*.

Even though I’m fifty percent Indian, I do have my white man’s genes to deal with, and so that means that I don’t walk like an Indian. Indians glide silently through the woods placing their toes down first, whereas the white man jabs his heels into the dirt like he’s prancing along the boardwalk at Atlantic City. More importantly, the Indian sees everything. He knows what’s going on around him. I have trouble in that department. I tend

to trip over things and stub my toes a lot. Sometimes I accidentally run into people at the grocery store. I mean literally run into them. I'm not proud to tell you that, but I think you deserve to know the truth. My grandma used to say that sometimes my mind wasn't quite connected to this earth. I don't know about that, but one day I was walking along a gravel road in Mississippi a week or two after Hurricane Katrina, and I almost stepped on a cottonmouth snake. Shorts, sneakers and cottonmouth fangs—not a good combination.

Knowing this about myself, I tried to pay extra close attention to my surroundings. If I'm going to march through a snake-infested forest, I should probably keep my eyes open.

Maybe that's why I was the first one to see the lions. Three of them, walking across our path, about 75 yards away.

My second grade teacher used to always say to me, "Use your words." She was female, and what the female population doesn't understand—in my opinion—is that sometimes you don't have any words to use. In this case I couldn't find any words, so I just pointed.

Cedric pulled on the reins, and Manford froze.

Together the three of us—well, four, if you count Manford—watched them walk through the forest. A shaggy maned male and two females. No fence. No moat. No signs saying, "Please don't feed the lions."

I know they knew we were there. They were downwind. They had to have caught our scent. Probably they watched us for a while, and then decided to move on. Maybe they were going to circle around and eat us for lunch.

I think our arresting officer, Cedric, was thinking the same thing, because he said, "Dove Fogico and Straight Arrow, I must now decide if I can trust you."

“My lord?” Dove asked. She’s really good at this Middle Earth thing or whatever we’re doing.

Cedric continued, “Two lions I can handle. Three is one too many for me. Your skill as an archer may be needed.”

I was about to say that I have no skill as an archer when Dove gave me the evil eye, so I kept my mouth closed.

“However,” he said, “I cannot give you these arrows if they are poisoned.”

I nodded. He and his horse had plenty of armor. He probably wasn’t too afraid of an archer, unless the archer was shooting poisoned arrows. Then even a shallow wound would be fatal.

“I need you to demonstrate to me that they are not poisoned.”

I see.

Actually I didn’t see. How was I supposed to do that? Shoot something and see if it died a quick natural death or a slow painful death?

Here’s the delicate part. I had no idea if they were poisoned or not. I had never seen those arrows before in my life.

Dove spoke up. “Good sir, I can assure you that my husband does not poison his arrows, and I will happily demonstrate for you. Pick out any one of the arrows and hand it to me, if you please.”

This time Cedric nodded. He stepped off the horse, reached into the quiver with a gloved hand, retrieved an arrow and handed it to Dove.

I wasn’t exactly prepared for what Dove was about to do. She held up her hand, held up an arrow and used the tip to slice a two-inch gash in her hand. Blood was flowing freely when she handed the arrow back to Cedric.

My mouth was hanging open. Wow! This was one tough woman.

Officer Cedric handed me my bow and arrows. I say “my” loosely because I had never seen them before. I thanked him because that seemed to be the polite thing to do, but what I really wanted was an AK47 or a Jedi light saber. Even a Glock 40 would be nice. Have you ever shot a Glock 40? When I get a little money ahead, I plan to buy one for the shop. I get my inspiration from Ray Charles. You might recall the scene from *The Blues Brothers*. I haven’t read all the statistics, but I gotta believe that an armed cashier cuts way down on shoplifting.

Anyway, I had my bow and arrows, and now that we were marginally safer, we marched on with renewed confidence.

We took turns every few moments doing a 360 degree visual sweep. That wasn’t hard for me—that’s the way I normally walk when I’m visiting someplace new. The point is, we stayed alert.

Maybe that kept the lions at bay.

Chapter 5

Okay, the next part is a little jumbled up, so bear with me while I try to explain what happened.

About the time I was really starting to get hungry, we came across a whole pile of metal men just like Cedric deep in the woods. I guess we got where we were going, because Cedric stepped off his horse and several guys gathered around him like he was some kind of celebrity. For a few minutes, he ignored us.

That gave me a chance to ask Dove a few questions.

“Are we really married?”

“No, Silly. But we gotta stick together here. It’s the only way we’ll survive.”

Oh. I guess that makes sense. Sorta.

“Where are we?”

“The kingdom of Arken.”

“Where’s that?”

“I don’t know.”

“That makes two of us. How did we get here?”

“I don’t know.”

“How are we getting home?”

“I don’t know.”

“How come you know so much about this place if you don’t know anything about it?”

“I’ve been here twice before.”

I sure wanted to know more, but at that moment our arresting officer seemed to remember that he had prisoners, even if one of them was still armed.

“We will see the king now,” Cedric announced.

The men parted, and Cedric led us forward, threading his way around the trees. I didn’t see a king, but I did see a blond girl about fourteen years old dressed up in some kind of fancy white embroidered dress talking with a woman who was dressed in plain clothing.

Then complete chaos.

Black bodies started dropping out of trees everywhere. I mean, they were alive. They were dressed in black and painted with black.

Cedric’s sword was out. He was running. “Save the king!” I heard him cry.

A man painted black, dressed in black was running toward me with an axe high over his head.

Dove put her hand on my shoulder and The Voice filled the forest: “Son, your bow.”

I was shaking so hard I could hardly get an arrow nocked in my bow. I pulled back hard and let fly. The man in black was still charging. I pulled another arrow from the quiver and scrambled to fire again. I pulled back hard, tried to aim, but the arrow went harmlessly past my assailant. There was no time to get another arrow. The axe man was upon me.

I was a dead man.

Then like a freight train, Cedric took him out. I mean it. I once saw a video of a train flying through a semi at sixty-five miles an hour. The semi exploded. Cedric came in from the side. The next moment, axe man was a motionless pile of broken bones.

I whirled around. I saw at least five men in black. They were all on the ground, and the best I could tell, they were all dead.

Dove was weeping. She came up and threw her arms around me. “Crazy Horse,” she said—that’s what she calls me—Crazy Horse, “I am so proud of you.”

The Voice filled the earth again. “You did well, son.”

What did I do?

By now I was crying, and looking for a place to hide.

“What did I do?” I asked Dove.

“Didn’t you see?” she asked. “You took out two assassins.”

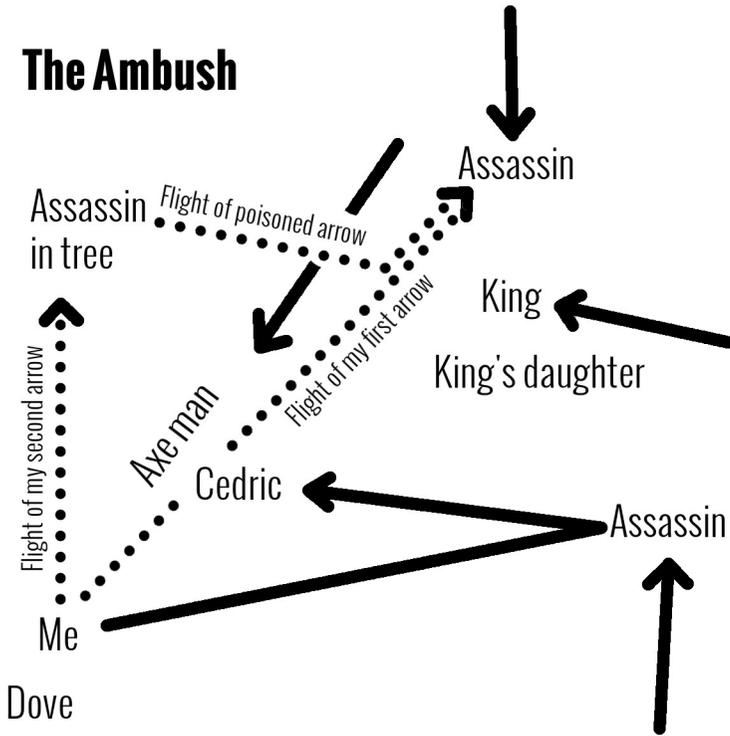
“He did more than that,” Cedric’s voice boomed. “He intercepted an arrow meant for the king, knocking it out of its flight. No doubt it was poisoned. And his second shot took out the assassin as he was reloading his crossbow.”

Cedric shook my hand. “I’ve been around archers all my life,” he said. “I’ve never seen shooting like that.”

For some reason, a line from Henry V came into my mind just then:

*And be it death proclaimed through our host
To boast of this or take the praise from God
Which is his only.*

I shook my head. No, I wanted to say, I cannot shoot like that. Those arrows were guided by God.



But Cedric was already gone, hurrying back to the king.

I heard men talking. Twenty Goraudok assassins. A suicide squad. Here for one purpose, to take out the king. All dead. Two of ours had fallen. A third had a shallow wound, but it was almost certainly poisoned. He probably would not survive. The healer was attending to him. A horse and rider in black were seen fleeing. Someone said, "The king said not to pursue. Our battle horses can't match the Goraudok hunters for speed.

We would only be led into another ambush, and more would die.”

I thought about my arrow going through the leaves and branches of a tree and piercing the heart of a man. A human being was dead

When I was a boy, living on a dirt road in North Carolina I received a BB gun for the first time in my life. In my excitement over this new toy, I shot the BB gun randomly through the branches of a tree. I heard a thud, and then from the tree dropped a mourning dove. I had hit her in the chest. I stood over her dead body, a ten-year-old boy with a new power that suddenly made me sick. I carried her body into the woods across the street and buried her. I never told anyone—no one—about this until now.

“Here’s the man who saved the king,” someone said in a voice way too loud.

People were pointing at me. I didn’t want anyone pointing at me. I was wiping away tears. I was shaking. I just wanted to go away and hide.

When I was a kid, my dad was driving us through Lansing, Michigan when our little Rambler was struck by an oncoming truck. My parents didn’t make it. That’s how I ended up living with my grandparents. I remember my mom saying, “Honey, I don’t think...” Then I heard a long scream. I saw a patch of green, and I woke up staring straight up into the rain coming down. My head was inches away from a telephone pole, and our car was just a twisted piece of metal a long ways away. Life is like that sometimes. You don’t have time to get ready, and all of a sudden everything has changed. A lady in a station wagon

drove me to the hospital where they picked pieces of glass out of my face and put a cast on my arm. I didn't want to go to the hospital. I wanted my mom and my dad. But the man standing there said I had to go to the hospital, and I couldn't have them. So I sat on a chair in that hospital, and all I know is that I kept shaking. I couldn't stop shaking. I thought I was cold, but the nurse told me I wasn't cold. I was just shaking.

I don't like shaking. A real man never shakes. He does battle, and then goes on to the next thing on his to do list. But I was shaking, and probably the whole world saw me shaking, and the king was walking up to me, and I didn't know what to do.

Get it together, man.

Proper etiquette? Do I bow? Do I lay down my weapons? Do I say, "Your Majesty, suffer thy servant to offer his humble service"?

Dove was bowing. I bowed.

But the king extended his right hand. I guess they shake hands here. So I shook his hand, and hoped he couldn't feel me trembling.

His eyes looked into mine, and they seemed strong, but not angry. I looked down.

He spoke. "I owe you my life."

I shook my head.

"You have great skill with a bow, Sir Archer."

I tried to say, "No," but the words got stuck in my throat.

"Tell me your name," he said. His voice was fatherly even though he couldn't be much older than me.

"Straight ... Straight Arrow, Your Honor."

“Straight Arrow,” he said smiling. “A fitting name for so fine an archer. And from where do you hail, Straight Arrow.”

I’m pretty sure that’s royal talk for: Name your hometown.

“Sun Prairie, sir.”

His brows knotted in confusion. “Prairie of the Sun. I have not heard of this land.”

“It’s a great distance away,” I said. In reality, I’m not sure it’s even on the same planet, but I how could I explain that?

The king appeared to want more information. So I added, “It’s right outside of Madison. It’s in the state of Wisconsin.”

The king laughed, and placed his hand on my shoulder. “Brother at arms,” he said, “Do not speak disparagingly of the land of your birth. It may be ‘mad as sin,’ but do not use words like ‘con,’ and ‘sin,’ and...” (he paused here) “...and ‘wiz’ to describe your homeland. These are evil words. You may have reasons for seeking fortune in a new land, but we will always honor the Prairie of the Sun for our new brother hails from that land.”

I nodded. How could you argue with that?

“And what of your parentage?” the king asked. “Your line of descent?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer that. “Definitely NOT Ho Chunk,” I said.

“I am relieved to hear it,” the king replied.

Good. I was on a roll. “I’m thinking Sioux, and, of course, Apache.”

“Sue and Ipatchy,” the king repeated. “These are strong names. You will always be welcome in my court.”

I liked the king. He and I understood each other in a convoluted sort of way.

Just then the young woman I had seen before the ambush walked up and wrapped her arms around the king. She looked up into his eyes and said, “Daddy, is this the archer who saved your life?”

I shook my head. “No, your highness,” I said. “I did not save your father’s life. God did. He just used my arrows.” There I said it. Now I just needed to figure out a way to tell them that they were standing in front of the most incompetent archer they had ever met. But they seemed so nice, I hated to disappoint them.

The young woman was talking, “My father says it is a wise man who who acknowledges the acts of the Almighty.”

I nodded. “Your father is a wise man.” It seemed like the right thing to say. You never know when you’re dealing with royalty. You just gotta give it your best guess, and hope you don’t end up starting a war or getting sent to the gallows.

The princess turned to Dove. “And who is this?” she asked.

“Dove Fogico, your highness.”

“I am Princess Gabriella,” she said. “Welcome to Arken.” With that she leaned forward to shake Dove’s hand.

It was at that moment that I again heard The Voice. It echoed through mountains and valleys. It shook the forest, and filled the earth. I heard The Voice, but I could not understand the words.

Princess Gabriella was smiling, but tears were running down her cheeks.

I didn't know what to say, but the princess spoke. She addressed the king: "She carries The Gift," she said.

"Are you certain?" the king asked.

The princess nodded. More tears. "Yes," she said quietly, "yes, I am sure."

Then the king spoke. "This is a rare honor, Dove Fogico. Tell me, how did you come to carry The Voice?"

Dove shook her head. "I don't know, your majesty."

The king nodded. "We welcome you, Dove Fogico, Carrier of The Voice. Not one soul has walked with The Gift in the Kingdom of Arken since Gabriella's mother, Queen Adelaide."

We nodded. The king was talking about the queen in the past tense. This isn't good.

"She passed beyond our reach three years ago," the king said quietly. Then he brightened. "But you, Dove Fogico—you have been sent by heaven bearing The Gift to the people of Arken. A time of healing has come."

I think that was the thing that did it. The president comes to Sun Prairie. Someone plants a bomb. I pick up the bomb and run. The bomb explodes or I get shot and end up in Guantanamo Bay, only it isn't Guantanamo Bay, it's Middle Earth or Oz or a galaxy long long ago and far far away. I get hauled around by Hercules in a tin can. I meet the king. I not only meet him, I accidentally save his life. I nearly get killed by an axe man. Cedric saves my life. I'm married to Dove, only we're not married. Now she's carrying the voice of God wherever she goes.

Normally, I'm a pretty tolerant guy, but I officially hit my quota of weirdness for one day. The king and the princess went out

of focus, the world spun around, and I pitched forward into the dirt.

Chapter 6

The next thing I knew, someone was trying to pour tea down my throat. Talk about disgusting!

The king came into focus. “Apologies, Straight Arrow. We had no idea that three days had passed since you had taken food.”

A young woman put a plate of berries in front of me. “Here, my lord,” she said to me, “eat these. Your strength will return.”

More food and fresh water was brought to me. The king and the princess moved on. They had other people they needed to talk to. Pretty soon it was just Dove and me sitting on a fallen log in the forest.

It seemed like a good time to move forward in our relationship.

“I’ve never been married before,” I said, looking for a place to start the conversation.

“Me neither,” she replied. Did she sound, I don’t know, wistful? Did she wish she was married? Did she like the idea of being married to me? These are important questions, but I wasn’t sure how to ask them.

“But I always imagined being married,” I forged ahead with that admission.

She nodded.

“I just never imagined it would be like this.”

She laughed out loud. “Crazy Horse,” she said, “you are a medical miracle.”

She says that a lot. I’m never quite sure what she means by it, but it seems friendly so I always smile.

About then, a horn of some sort blasted. Somebody said it was time to move on, so we started marching along with everybody else.

“Where are we going?” I asked Dove.

“Someone told me that we’re traveling to the king’s winter castle. They left his summer palace four days ago.”

“Oh.” I guess when you’re king you can have two houses. Kinda like spending the winter in Florida or Arizona or Hawaii. It’s not really for me. I spent September in Florida a couple times. They have the scrawniest squirrels down in Florida. You couldn’t even make a decent sandwich out of a Florida squirrel. It’s all because the leaves don’t turn color down there. Everything is green including the alligators that sit outside your pop up camper at three o’clock in the morning and hiss so you don’t dare walk across the lawn to go inside the house and use the bathroom. I know pop up campers have a toilet, but the owners didn’t want me to use it. Suffice it to say, I didn’t get much sleep down in Florida.

Cedric and his battle horse rode out far ahead of our column, cutting a path of safety through the forest for all of us. That whole “Army of One” business—if ever there was a living example, it was Cedric. He was the Army, Air Force, Navy and Marines all rolled into one. He took out the axe man like he was swatting a fly. One moment the axe man was a charging bull of slicing rage. The next moment, he was bug guts. All because of Cedric.

He saved my life.

He saved my life and ... I neglected to thank him.

Ouch! I hate it when I do stupid things like that. Charlie Brown used to wear a bag over his head. I get that.

“Dove,” I said, “I forgot to thank Cedric. I mean that guy with an axe would have killed me.”

She smiled. I love it when she smiles. When Dove smiles, then I know the world is okay. “Later today,” she said.

Dove smiled at me. Maybe she likes me.

Yes, maybe she likes me. That thought made everything feel a whole lot better.

We marched on into the delicious afternoon, Dove and me. The early autumn breeze picked up wisps of her long dark hair and blew them in swirls around her. It made me think maybe the angels were dancing as we walked along beside them. I would dance too, if I knew how and if I wasn't scared to try.

“So you've been here before?” I asked.

“Twice,” she nodded. “The first time I was praying, and I had this vision of a little girl who was dying. So I started to pray for her, and the next thing I knew I was in her room. I placed my hands on her to pray for her, but then a voice from heaven was speaking to her and to me. I don't how to explain it, but I could see the disease leaving her. Her fever broke, she sat up in bed and hugged me. She looked up and said goodbye. The next moment I was back in my house on South Street in Sun Prairie.”

Oh. Prayer and a parallel universe. Zipping through those space-time portals just as easy as ordering breakfast at Sir Hobos on Main Street. Who is this woman?

“Wow,” I said.

Okay. Let's sort out the facts. Dove visits a little girl. The girl is dying, but then she gets better. So how does Dove do that? I mean I pray for people. Do they get better? Nope. Clearly, I must be doing something wrong.

Dove visits this girl. It's a short visit. Only a few minutes and only in the little girl's room. And somehow she knew she was in Arken. Did her room have a "Welcome to Arken" sign in it?

"How did you know this little girl was in Arken?" I asked.

"Actually I didn't—until I returned, a few months later. It happened like this. I came home from work. I was starving. One moment I was standing in my kitchen trying to decide what to make for supper, and the next I was sitting at a table in an inn, with a bowl of soup in front of me."

"Didn't even get a chance to look at the menu?" I said.

Dove smiled. "No. But the soup was good."

That's what I like about Dove. She's flexible.

"Anyway, there was a family sitting at the next table, and they were talking. This is what I heard: 'I hear they never found her body,' the man said. 'That's, right,' his wife said, 'Maybeth's sister works at the summer palace. She saw the queen fall overboard. Couldn't swim, poor thing. They put swimmers in the water, but they couldn't find her. The sharks were circling the boat. One of the men lost his leg all the way to the knee. The king was frantic. But what could he do? His own men would be eaten alive. He had to call off the search.' The people at the next table had a son about twelve years old. He piped up with, 'Yeah, she's nothing more than shark food, no doubt about it.' 'Hold your tongue,' his mother cried. 'I will not have you speak of our Queen Adelaide in this manner.'"

Hmm. Shark food. Not a pleasant way to go. I don't know about you, but I don't want to go like that. That's way down

there with getting buried alive, drowning or being bitten by a brown recluse spider. My cousin got bit by one once. His whole leg turned black and nearly fell off. I'd much rather get put in front of a firing squad. Or maybe take a nap and wake up in heaven. Less dramatic, but more relaxing.

Dove was still talking. "Then the boy turned to his mom and said, 'Tell me again how Queen Adelaide came to carry The Gift.' His mother smiled. 'That's a good boy. Remember it well, my son, for this is a story you will tell your children and grandchildren. Queen Adelaide was not of royal birth. She was born to farmers who could barely keep food on the table. When the Queen was a young child, she fell ill. Her parents could not afford a healer, so they did their best and prayed for a miracle. When no miracle came, her father went outside to raise his fist against heaven, and her mother wept until no tears were left. They thought they would come in and find their daughter dead, but instead they found her awake, alive and healthy as a young goat. When they asked her what happened, she said a beautiful woman with long dark hair ...'"

"That's you!" I blurted out.

Dove blushed. "A woman with long dark hair entered her room. The disease left, the woman vanished, but The Gift remained.' The woman looked at her son and added, 'Heaven bless that woman; she was the angel who brought The Voice of healing and wisdom to the Kingdom of Arken.'"

"Are you an angel?" I had to ask. I mean, I like her. Maybe she likes me. We're pretending to be married. That could mean that someday we might actually be married. If you're going to think about getting married to someone, it pays to verify that they are indeed human.

"No, Silly. Of course not. I'm the same person I've always been."

That's a relief.

Dove went on. "I found that I had a purse with me containing gold and silver coins. I took a room at the inn. During the day, I helped the owner's wife cook and clean. At night, I sat at the tables and listened to the gossip. I was there for about a week. Then one night I fell asleep in my room, and the next morning I awoke to my alarm ringing in my home on South Street. I got up and went to work. Even though I had spent a week in the Kingdom of Arken, I was only gone from Sun Prairie overnight."

This is a good thing. I was really wondering how I was going to get someone to cover for me at the bowling alley. I mean how do you place a call from Middle Earth when there's no cell coverage?

Then I remembered the bomb.

"What happened to the case?" I said to Dove. "I mean the you-know-what."

"Oh," she said, "I left that with the supply master. He tied it to one of the pack horses."

Visions of horse meat flying over our heads came to mind. "Are you sure that's safe?" I asked. Turning a horse into Fourth of July fireworks did not seem like a nice thing to do. Especially since we're in a foreign country.

"Unless he opens it back up and rewires it, we should be fine. I stopped the clock and pulled the wire."

Oh. She stopped the clock and pulled the wire. Then she flossed her teeth and made up a grocery list. All in a day's work.

That's another thing I like about Dove. She's really smart, but she never acts like it. She just acts like a regular person.

We marched until we came to a large clearing. There we set up camp. I'm not big on camping to be honest with you. I mean I like a grilled hamburger as much as the next guy. But smoke and bugs and animals on the prowl—not my thing. I gotta tell you I once went camping at Devil's Lake with some friends. We had brats, of course, and watermelon. And I thought all the leftover food would be perfectly safe in the cooler we brought. So I locked up the cooler and left it on the ground outside our tent.

Big mistake.

A little after midnight, I heard this snorting sound, like a herd of hogs had invaded our campsite. The people I was with elected me to go out and check it out. I guess they knew I was part Indian. So I took my flashlight with the unreliable batteries and stepped out of the tent.

Our campsite was overrun with gangster raccoons. The scrawny creatures they send out to get flattened by cars do nothing to prepare you for these monsters. The locked cooler was open. These mammals on steroids were crunching their way through raw eggs and raw sausage, shells, packaging and all.

I was stupid enough to think that I could run them off. Another guy joined me and we kicked leaves in their faces for about twenty minutes. They backed up a foot or two, but they weren't too happy about it.

I am not a camping fan.

At least tonight the raccoons would probably leave us alone. To get to us, they would need to get past guys who would happily make them into raccoon soup. For tonight, the prowling animals would leave us alone.

On the other hand, the restroom facilities were far from acceptable. Forget about privacy. And apparently these people had never heard of toilet paper. I didn't ask what they used instead. I really didn't want to know.

I remember Les Stroud faced this challenge on *Survivorman*. He discussed the process of selecting the right leaves, and the importance of testing those leaves first.

That made a lot of sense to me. When I was a kid, I once went fishing along the banks of the Mississippi River. How was I supposed to know that I was sitting in a patch of poison ivy?

There are some things in life that you'd just as soon forget.

Since Dove and I were supposed to be married, I was a little concerned about what our sleeping arrangements would be. But married or not, all the women slept in tents in the center of the camp. The men slept out in the open in a ring around them. And the watch formed a ring around the men.

We had some kind of beef jerky and barley soup for supper. Then I got a bedroll from the supply master, found a level spot on the ground, and decided to call it a day. I mean, what else was there to do. No Netflix. No cable. No Facebook. I didn't see so much as a deck of cards or a chess set.

Since I had no way of knowing whether I would wake up in Arken, in Sun Prairie, in heaven, or not at all, I got down on my knees to say goodnight to God.

I wasn't alone as I knelt. I noticed others doing the same. Some were making the sign of the cross. Maybe they were Catholic. I would never make it as a Catholic. Too much choreography. Sit, stand, kneel. You need a program—and even then I still wouldn't get it straight. I've tried doing the sign of the cross just in case it adds anything, but I can never get it straight. I always end up going around in a circle.

So I knelt there without doing the sign of the cross and thought about kneeling beside my bed when I was a small child. Every night I knelt down beside my bed and prayed:

Now I lay me down to sleep.

I pray the Lord my soul to keep.

If I should die before I wake,

I pray the Lord my soul to take.

I often got the keep and the take part mixed up, and I had no idea what it meant, but I prayed it with great sincerity, and I believe God heard every word.

Now that I'm here in Middle Earth or Arken or wherever I am, I find myself rethinking that prayer. Did God finally answer it? Did He take my soul? And, if He did, where did He take it? This can't be heaven, but I'm pretty sure it isn't the other place, so what gives? Is this like a stopping off place—not really purgatory, but instead some kind of place where I need to learn something before I move on?

“Dear God,” I prayed, “I don't know where I am, but You seem to be here, and I guess that makes it okay. I'm a little concerned because I have no way of cleaning the bowling alley tonight, so I give that problem to You. But I thank You for keeping Dove and me safe today. I pray that You will please get us home safely real soon, like maybe tomorrow. Amen.” I almost stood up, and then I remembered one more thing: “PS. Dove and I are married here! I mean sort of. I don't know what to say about that; I just thought I'd let You know.”

That put a smile on my face. Suddenly, I realized how very, very tired I was. I was one of the few men exempt from watch duty that night, so I climbed into the Arken version of a sleeping bag. It was wool, and I don't like wool—it's too scratchy—but I was too tired to care. I knew that bugs or worse would

probably crawl on me during the night, but I couldn't keep my eyes open. I closed my eyes and didn't know another thing until I was smelling coffee ten hours later.

They say you need sleep because it helps you file away everything that happened all day so the next day you can start fresh. I guess I had a lot to file away because I don't normally sleep for ten hours.

I rolled up my sleeping bag, and took it to the supply master who put it on a pack horse. As I walked through the camp looking for Dove, I overheard snippets of gossip. No Goraudoks all night. A couple of lions, but they were in the distance. The watch commander found one man sleeping. He would be punished, but I didn't catch how. We were moving on in an hour. The valley narrowed further on. Another ambush was expected, but our scouts would scale both sides and check every tree.

I was just starting to get settled in for a new day when the camp erupted with the news.

The king's daughter was missing.

And there was no sign of Dove Fogico.

Chapter 7

It didn't make much sense to me. I mean, I'm the crazy one. If anyone would be likely to wander off and get lost, it would be me, not Dove. She's sensible. We sort of balance each other out like that.

At first it was chaos—everyone hollering “Princess Gabriella!” and “Your Highness!” Then the word got circulated that maybe that wasn't the brightest idea with the woods crawling with Goraudok assassins and all. Of course, it didn't really affect me because I was calling, “Dove! Dove Fogico!” So pretty soon other people were hollering for Dove with an occasional cry of “Gabriella!” thrown in there.

The best trackers in the Kingdom were at the winter castle, but that didn't help us much because we were still a two-day march away. So we did our best without them. We searched in groups of five, with a knight assigned to each group for security.

As the day progressed, I got more and more uneasy. At first I was sure that it was just some sort of mix-up. Eighty people were traveling together. Dove and Gabriella would show up. But they didn't show up. They just went for a short walk. They'll be back. But they didn't come back. They wandered off, lost their way. But Dove and I had watched *Survivorman* plenty of times. She knew—we both knew—if you get lost, you stay put. Someone will come along and find you. But nobody came along. Nobody found them.

Over and over again, we tried to figure out how it could have happened. The women's outdoor toilet was curtained off, but it was still inside the perimeter of the watch. There was the guy who fell asleep on watch, but even if Dove and Gabriella had walked right beside him, the watch was redundant. They would have been spotted by the others. The clearing was tested for tunnels; none were found.

By the time the day was over, we had followed every animal trail, every logical path, and quite a few not so logical ones within a two-to-three hour radius of the camp.

As evening shadows lengthened, we stumbled back into the clearing no further ahead than we had been that morning.

All day I kept praying for them. I asked God to give me some reassurance that they were all right, but all I got was silence.

Some kind of witchcraft was at work. That was the general consensus. The more everybody talked about it, the sicker I felt. I was already worried about Dove. We were in some kind of parallel universe where all the rules were changed. What kind of dark powers were available here? I didn't know. I just know that people who are into that kind of thing in my own world do all sorts of unsavory things with their victims—things I would rather not contemplate. I tried to put those horrors out of my mind, but they kept coming back like that feral cat that kept having kittens out in the strawberry patch. She'd have her litter of kittens, and then she'd go into the back yard and take down a Wisconsin squirrel. She was a tough cat.

Dove and the princess were gone. There was no good human explanation. Devilry. Witchcraft. That's what everybody was saying, and I didn't think to disagree with them until they started pointing fingers at me.

“What do we know about this man?”

Not much, but now didn't seem to be the right time to fill them in.

"Where does he really come from?"

"Isn't it strange that he shows up at the exact moment of the ambush?"

"But he saved the king."

"How do we know that wasn't a show, put on to deceive us?"

"But he's an archer."

"No archer can shoot like that. He knocked the poison arrow out of its flight. That is beyond the skill of an archer. He is a practitioner of the dark arts. Black magic guided his arrow."

"But he killed two Goraudok assassins."

"They would have gladly sacrificed twenty just to put their agent close to the king."

"I heard the princess say that his wife carries The Gift."

"Or she's a witch."

"They show up. She disappears with the princess. Don't tell me that isn't strange."

"It would explain a lot. She uses her dark arts to put a man on watch asleep. She darkens the eyes of the other watchers. She puts the princess under her spell and they walk out. They could be halfway to Goraudok by now."

"Why didn't I see this yesterday?"

Anyway, you get the idea. It wasn't long until I was standing in front of the king—stripped of my bow and arrows, with a ring of accusers all around me. Only one person came to my defense—Cedric.

“Your Majesty, Straight Arrow saved your life, and Dove Fogico may well have saved mine. I don’t have any reason not to trust him.”

I looked at the king. His face was etched with lines of worry, fatigue and exhaustion.

He motioned for me to talk, so this is what I said, “Your Honor, it is true that I am a stranger to the Kingdom of Arken. But I come here not as an enemy, but as a friend. In my own land, I am a merchant. I sell arrowheads. But God sent me here because He wants me to do some good here. By God’s hand I was able to save your life, and I would happily do it again if God gave me the ability to do so. Likewise, Dove is not an agent of evil. She is a gentle soul, a kind woman who only desires healing. If she is with the princess, I know she is doing everything she can to protect her. And I am terribly worried about her, just as you are about your daughter.”

I thought it was a pretty good speech. I would be convinced. Back when I was in high school, I was on the debate team, and I was pretty good—like going-to-state good. People said I would make a fantastic attorney. They said I would never lose a case.

I lost this one.

“I’m sorry,” the king said, “but we don’t know whether you are who you say you are or not. For our safety, I need to put you under arrest until things become more clear.”

Someone pounded a stake into the ground in the middle of the clearing. They made me sit down with my back to it, and then they tied my hands behind my back to the stake.

This was not going to be a comfortable night. If I make it back to Sun Prairie, it’s going to take five or six chiropractic adjustments and a bucket of ice to set this one straight.

Chapter 8

Are you one of those people who can sleep on an airplane? I'm not. I do a lot better in my own bed with three pillows arranged just right, my Michael Dulin Pandora station playing, and the window open an inch and a half. I also can't stand it when the covers are tucked in at the bottom of the bed. Whenever I stay at a motel, the first thing I do is pull the sheets and the blankets out so my feet can stick out at night. My grandma said it had something to do with my mom using clothespins to secure my blankets when I was a baby because I tended to kick them off. I don't know.

So what I'm trying to say is that I racked up about thirty seconds of sleep, a sore neck, a sore back, a sore butt and sore shoulders that night I was tied to the stake. I also had some sort of bug crawling on me, and, of course, there wasn't anything I could do about it.

One time Dove told me she was terrified of being tied up, or being trapped in closed in spaces. I didn't know what to say, so she just laughed and said we could talk about something else.

I hope Dove isn't tied to a stake somewhere.

The next morning, they were kind enough to give me fifteen minutes to stretch and use the bathroom before they tied my hands again, this time in front, and tied my feet also—just far enough apart so I could walk, but not run, and, if I didn't pay attention, I would trip.

I guess it pays to find a way to get the king to trust you. I wished I could talk to him again.

I did hear, however, that the king made the decision to move on to the winter castle. From there he would send out patrols to search the entire forest and his entire kingdom. He would also begin the process of mobilizing all of Arken for war.

Hmm. I show up in another world just in time for a war. This is not good timing.

Since most of us were on foot, we marched. The nice thing about marching all day is that it takes your mind off how tired you are.

As we trudged along, I did manage to pick up snippets of conversation. From what I could gather, everybody figured that the princess was kidnapped by agents from the kingdom of Goraudok. Whether Dove and I were in on it was an open question. Goraudok was not a popular place. No one vacationed there, not even for a quick overnight. I guess you could say it was Arken's equivalent of North Korea—off limits for everybody.

Getting to Goraudok required climbing some heavy duty mountains. I'm not sure how I feel about that. When I was young, I always imagined I would become a mountain climber. But the last time I climbed a mountain, I ended up clapping the whole way because someone told me that was the best way to keep the bears away. The guys at my base camp thought I was a bear-phobic wimp, but, hey, I'm still alive, and I note that they didn't even make the climb.

Anyway, we were not going to Goraudok. We were on our way to the Arken winter castle. To get to the king's winter quarters, we needed to get through Knife Edge Pass, and I guess that wasn't quite as easy as getting in the Buick and running to the grocery store.

Knife Edge Pass was a steep and narrow valley that was a perfect place to get ambushed again by Goraudok assassins. As a rule, the king's party didn't like the place. You could say they were nervous about that spot, under normal conditions. But not today. The mood was: *Bring it on*. Everybody was angry, and here were fifty soldiers who badly wanted to maul their enemy.

Angry or not, we took the Pass slowly. The king relied on his own version of the Navy Seals who went into the pass ahead of us. Some were heavily armored like Cedric, designed to draw fire from anyone lying in ambush. Others were dressed in camouflage and trained in sneaking up on people. Their job was to get in behind the ambush and murder the bad guys when their attention was fixed on Cedric and Manford and the other metal men on mounts.

It took most of the afternoon to declare the Pass safe, and another hour to actually march through it and get to the other side. Once we did, the trees thinned, and the forest opened up to farmland. A patrol rode ahead, I think to announce our arrival. Anyway, by nightfall we were camped in an open field surrounded by three hundred villagers.

There were bonfires everywhere. The young men of the village were gung ho about marching all night right through Knife Edge Pass into the forest to find the king's daughter. But the king said no.

"Wait for morning," I heard him say. "I've sent riders ahead. They will return in the morning, and a commander will be assigned. If the princess is still in Arken, I have no doubt that you will find her."

Some of the women were weeping. The men looked grim. Several families brought gifts to the king, which he received and passed to the Supply Master. Someone said there were a thou-

sand times a thousand—that’s a million by my math—souls in Arken, yet the king seemed to remember everybody’s name. He embraced man, woman and child alike. It didn’t take long for me to figure out that the king was a real popular fellow.

I don’t know. For some reason that made me feel lonely. I hate it when I feel like that. I remember feeling all alone when I was a kid. Back then I said whatever came into my head because I didn’t know any better. So one day I came home from school and told my mom that I didn’t have any friends. My mother was horrified. She marched down to the elementary school and demanded to know what was going on. But my teacher said to her, “Nonsense! Your son has many friends. He is well liked by the other children.” So Mom came home with the good news: I had friends; I just didn’t know who any of them were.

Here in the kingdom of Arken I had exactly one and a half friends: Dove and Cedric. I counted Cedric as half a friend because—well just because.

But Dove—now she was a real friend. She came from my world. She understands me. I don’t know if she likes me, I mean, you know, in the boy-girl way, but she seems to like hanging out with me. Right now, she was the only person I had.

Only I didn’t have her. She was gone, and I didn’t know if I would ever get her back.

I missed Dove. I tried to put out of my mind all the horrible things that might be happening to her, but they kept crowding back in. I wanted to go looking for her, even if it meant going back into the forest in the dark alone. Maybe she was there alone and afraid. Maybe she was injured. Maybe she was bleeding. Maybe she was unconscious. Maybe someone was hurting her. Maybe an animal had her cornered. Maybe she was fighting for her life, wondering where I was. Maybe bugs were

crawling all over her. Dove is claustrophobic. If she was captured and tied up, or in a jail cell—what would that do to her? How would she keep from going crazy?

I had to stop.

I had to stop.

I looked up into the sky and tried to figure out where God was. I looked at the stars I could see, hundreds of light years away.

Why is God so far away when you need Him to be close? I wanted to talk to Him about Dove. I wanted to ask Him if she was okay. I wanted Him to send her back to me. I wanted Him to put His arm around my shoulder and tell me it was okay. I wanted Him to be with me. I wanted to tell Him all these things, but when I tried to say them, no words came out. Just tears.

I sat down on the ground and shivered.

Maybe The Voice was protecting her. I don't know. Does The Voice do that sort of thing?

Anyway, about then someone figured out that I wasn't tied up for the night. They found a tree and tied my foot to it. They even gave me an Arken sleeping bag, which I couldn't climb into with my foot tied to the tree, but at least I could wrap it around me, and lie down.

I meant to kneel and pray, but my head hit the dirt and the next moment I was dreaming.

In my dream I looked across the stars and I could see her far, far away. I could see Dove. She was standing on a balcony, looking up into heaven. Below her were the streets of Sun Prairie and forest and fields of Arken. I saw the winter castle and the summer palace. I saw the king, and I saw the president stepping out of his limousine. I saw Cedric charging the axe

man. And I heard Dove crying out to God, “I must save him. Father God, do not let me die. I need to save him.”

Somehow I knew she was talking about me.

Then she started singing that song about the flower that grew on the Arken hills, and everybody—I mean everybody in the universe—the president, the king, Cedric stopped and looked up to listen to her.

*There is a flow’r that grows
on hills of Arken land,
and in its blossoms lie
the gift that heals our land.*

*For, yes, we lost our way,
and when we fell within,
the darkness tore apart
the peace that made us whole.*

*A thousand knights were called.
The king to battle rode.
The men in armor strove.
But none could heal our land.*

The way was not, it seemed,

in men and arms to be.

For God Himself had chos'n

the daughter of a king.

A voice from heav'n above

did speak to her that day:

“To you is giv'n the gift

that heals the Arken land.”

“For born beneath the snows

on hills in your sweet land

there is a flower that grows—

the gift that heals your land.”

The princess rode away

with basket full of wealth

until she stood below

the hill that held that gift.

*A troll stood guard that day
and barred the passageway.*

*“You may not pass,” he said,
“til all you have you give.”*

*The princess carried much—
the wealth of all the land.*

*Her basket full of jewels—
the wealth of all the land.*

*A girl without her wealth
is like a sheep just shorn.*

*But let it go she did
to grasp the gift she’s giv’n.*

*She turned around again
the troll, the jewels to stone
they turned, and no mere man
could turn them back again.*

*Uphill she climbed until
she reached the mountaintop.
From there she brought the gift—
the gift that heals our land.*

*There is a flow'r that grows
on hills of Arken land,
and in its blossoms lie
the gift that heals our land.*

As Dove finished singing, Sun Prairie and Arken grew dark, and there among the stars all I could see was Dove and Princess Gabriella. Dove held a single rose in her hand. When she handed it to the princess, Dove faded away, and all I saw was the princess.

Dreams are funny that way. They're all jumbled and tumbled, and they don't make any sense.

My sleeping bag was all tangled up too. I sat up and looked around. The bonfires were still going. Some people were up talking or standing guard. But almost everyone was sleeping. I straightened out my bedroll, made myself a little pillow, and sank back into sleep.

Chapter 9

When morning came, I knew what I needed to do.

In the Bible there is a story about a blind man named Bartimaeus. He sat on the side of the road just outside Jericho—the city that was cursed. One day he heard a commotion. When he asked what was up, they told him that Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth was walking by.

I guess everybody expected him to behave. But he didn't behave. Instead, he started screaming as loud as he could: "Son of David, have mercy on me! Son of David, have mercy on me!" ("Son of David"—that's what Bartimaeus called Jesus.)

Everybody tried to get him back in line. "You're making a scene." "You're way too loud." "Jesus is busy." "Jesus has more important things to do." "Shut up."

"Son of David, have mercy on me! Son of David, have mercy on me!"

After a while, Jesus heard him. "What do you want me to do for you?" He said.

"Master, I want to see."

Isn't it good to know that somewhere in the universe there is Someone who can make a blind man see?

I saw the king at a distance, conferring with his guards. So I started shouting my own version of “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

“Your Majesty! I need an audience. I’m begging you. Please talk to me.”

Yeah. I got the look from more than one person. My guards came by and told me to zip it.

So I shouted louder.

This didn’t go over very well with the guards. They pushed me down and tore a piece of cloth from my blanket and started to wrap it around my mouth. I was thrashing around, and they were gagging me.

At first I didn’t understand why they stopped, and stood at attention. Then I looked up. The king was standing there.

“Straight Arrow,” he said.

I had to catch my breath. “Your majesty. ... I ... I am not a spy. ... I am not a traitor. I am a simple traveler. ... Please ... let me go and join the search. ... Please. ... I must find the woman I love, just as you must find your daughter. Please let me help.”

“Do you come to us with new information?” the king asked.

I didn’t understand the question.

“Do you come to us with new information to establish your innocence?”

I don’t know. My mind was racing. New information. It was just like when the bullies used to stop me on my way home from school and ask me questions I didn’t know how to answer. *Do I have new information?*

“Straight Arrow,” the king said, “this matter is closed. With the information we have now, you are neither guilty nor innocent in our eyes. We must hold you in custody until a determination can be made one way or the other. Do not speak to me about this again until new information is available.”

New information. What does that look like?

Then the king smiled and put a hand on my shoulder. “This is our hour of trial, Straight Arrow. A good man will be patient in times like these. If you are innocent, vindication will come. Your name and your freedom will be restored.”

Then the king walked away.

So much for “Son of David, have mercy on me.”

We ate breakfast and broke camp. Then we marched—me in walking chains—everyone else in boots. We marched our last day of marching to the winter castle. On the side of the road watching us go by stood men in rough cotton shirts stained with the hard work of farming or smithing or whatever else men here do, women in long full dresses looking like Julie Andrews in *Sound of Music*, and children dressed like their parents.

Great! My introduction to the Kingdom of Arken—a prisoner in chains! How to win friends and influence people.

I looked around, but it seemed like the people weren’t paying much attention to me. Their eyes were on the king. Little girls carried baskets and sprinkled the golden flowers of autumn on the road before the king. Little boys saluted. Women wept. Men stood at attention, blinking back tears.

Men stood solemn still.

The king's daughter was missing—taken by some unseen evil. Dove and Gabriella were gone, and nobody knew if we would ever get them back.

Stop. We will get them back.

We will get them back.

I stumbled, and almost fell. It's hard to walk when you can't see the road. I blinked hard, and the tears fell off my face to the ground.

I looked around. Everybody was crying, I think. Everybody.

For some reason, I couldn't get Dove's song out of my head.

The way was not, it seemed,

in men and arms to be.

For God Himself had chos'n

the daughter of a king.

I couldn't get it out of my head, and then I realized why: On the sides of the road, people were singing it. Voices everywhere picked up and carried that eerie chant. There were tears—many tears, but the people carried those words with their voices nevertheless.

The sound of many voices filled the valley. And then, from the hills beyond, a trumpet answered.

No, not a single trumpet, but many—easily a hundred. I looked off in the distance. Men on horseback approached. People around me shielded their eyes from the morning sun, straining to see.

Suddenly, everyone started cheering.

“What is it?” I asked my guard. “What's going on?”

“The king’s banner,” he said.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

He looked at me like my head was made of concrete. “Search parties,” he said. “The king’s daughter will be found.”

A thousand horses rode past. Each grim-faced rider saluted the king who sat still on horseback, and greeted many by name. I saw hounds, trumpeters, men at arms, farmers with pitchforks and pikes, young men and old.

After asking my guard question after question, this is what I learned: Word of the king’s daughter’s disappearance had been brought to every town and village in the district. Throughout the night men were gathered, and every rideable horse was pressed into service. (I guess some horses are better left unriden. Don’t ask me why; I’m not a horse person.) The search parties were each composed of six men. Two were soldiers, ideally one of them a knight. One was a trumpeter. There was a set of signals that would allow search parties to keep track of one another, and notify one another if they caught any sign of the princess. One was a tracker, skilled at reading signs on a trail or at running dogs. (Clothing from the princess’s wardrobe was brought out so all the hounds had a scent to follow.) Two of the men in each group were farmers, farriers, blacksmiths, merchants or whatever. These men carried the bulk of the supplies so the others could ride light. Generally one person in each group had some skill in the healing arts, or at least knew some form of Arken first aid.

The forest was divided into a little over a hundred strips of land. Each search party was assigned one of these areas. The soldiers had already been trained on how to follow a true north heading even on cloudy days and nights. They were to continue their search until they reached the summer palace and the sea.

If any Goraudok assassins were found, they were to be disabled, captured and brought in for questioning.

I had a friend down in Illinois who got ready for Y2K by installing a natural gas generator so he would have emergency power when the grid went down. You gotta admire people who prepare.

These Arkens—they were prepared. I like that.

For a brief moment, I thought about the lions in the forest. Who would win in a fight between a lion and one of these search parties? No doubt about it, the lion would be dead meat. I mean these guys were angry, and they were in no mood to mess around.

But then I got thinking about Dove and Gabriella out there all alone among those lions. Do you suppose ... ?

I shook my head. You just can't go there. Lions and bears and venomous snakes. No, I needed to think about something else.

For some reason my mind went to my neighbor. He was wounded, but whatever got him had some kind of poison in it. I don't understand it, and when I asked him about it, he said the army doesn't talk about it. I guess it must be some kind of chemical weapon or something. Whatever it is, they don't have a cure for it.

Sometimes I think depression and anxiety is like the natural human condition. I mean there are so many terrible things that can happen to you that you could go through your whole life just reading the list and never get to the bottom of it.

"Think happy thoughts," my mother used to say when I woke up with nightmares when I was a kid. I could never come up with any happy thoughts, so she sang songs to me until I fell back to sleep. After she died, I stopped having nightmares. I stopped having dreams of any kind. Or maybe my whole life

just became a nightmare for a while until I climbed out of it. I guess. At least I had my grandparents. Some kids don't have anybody.

My feet were getting tired. And I was getting hungry for popcorn cooked in coconut oil with lots of butter and salt on it. I really needed a break from hiking, from being a prisoner, from Dove's disappearance, from Arken, yeah, probably from reality. I could really have gone for a good movie like *Slumdog Millionaire* or *Ladykillers* or even *Despicable Me*.

Of course they don't have any movie theaters here in Arken. I know. I asked.

I would even settle for a half hour of the *Roadrunner*. I mean, Wile E. Coyote—he's the best in my book. Talk about resilience! Now there's a guy who knows how to handle setbacks. He gets blown up, and he just goes back to Acme Manufacturing and tries again. That's what I need: an Acme "Rescue Dove and Escape from Arken" kit.

They don't have cartoons here either. Or TV. Or the Internet.

They do have sweet corn, though, and they're civilized enough to brush it with butter and rub it in salt. We had that for our noon meal, and I'm telling you: It was tasty.

By late afternoon, the road wound around the base of a mountain, and then there it was: the winter castle—exactly as it had appeared to me in my dream.

How weird is that?

I guess I must have thought it was pretty weird because I was standing there gawking at it when my guard grabbed my arm and pulled me back in line to keep up with the flow of traffic. I

have to confess that I had moments where I felt like clobbering that guy, and this was one of them.

Chapter 10

I've never been fond of jails or prisons. I once visited the Ohio State Reformatory in Mansfield, Ohio. I know—it sounds like a juvenile lock up, but it wasn't. A friend of mine got me in there. Don't ask—it's a long story. Anyway, I thought we were just there for a tour. Turns out his girlfriend worked there. Maybe I shouldn't say girlfriend, especially since he was married. To someone else. But anyway, we get inside this prison, and he goes to talk to this woman, and it soon becomes clear that there's a crowd so I wander off by myself to someplace else that I hope is safe.

Anyway, I walked into this room and tried to pretend like I knew why I was there, and that I was busy or important, and basically send off the message: "Don't mess with me."

But it wasn't working. This 400 pound mass of muscle was looking me over in a most uncomfortable way. "Look at him," he said to the tattoo parlor standing next to him, "he's really pretty."

I looked around and suddenly noticed: *There are no guards in here.*

Not that the guards are any better.

Here's the sum total of the employment application for the job as prison guard: Are you the most unpleasant human being who ever walked the face of this earth? If the answer is yes, then you're in.

I'm sure there are nice prison guards and jailers, but I haven't met very many.

The Arken Tower warden was no exception. Wanna guess what his first words to me were?

You would think he could see that I just marched three days in chains and I'm exhausted, need a shower and a shave, and could really use a hot meal and a good night's sleep. I mean, what's wrong with, "Welcome to Arken Tower. I hope your stay here will be a pleasant one. If there's anything I can do for you, don't hesitate to ask."

But no. Oh, no. His first words to me were: "You try to escape—I cut off your feet."

Okay.

It wasn't exactly the Ritz Carlton, but I did have my own room. Six feet by three feet. Metal door with a slot for meals by the floor and a little barred window so I could watch the guards, and they could watch me. Arken's version of television I guess. Through the hole in the wall, I could look outside and see the mountain I marched past to get here. That was nice. But winter was coming. I didn't know how cold it gets in this place, but I would have felt better if I had a thermostat with some forced air heating. I mean, even a steam heat register would be an upgrade. The floor was covered with straw, and a couple of old wool blankets were folded up in the corner.

I'm mildly allergic to wool. It makes me itch. Maybe it's my skin. I always buy Barbasol Thick & Rich Shaving Cream for Sensitive Skin when I'm back at the Sun Prairie Wal-Mart. You know they recently expanded into a Super Center. There's a really nice guy there with a beard that works produce on the weekends.

Anyway, on the floor was a ceramic pot for, well, you know. And, of course, it didn't flush. Around the base of this pot was something that looked like fleas hopping around.

Welcome home.

You will recall, if you are familiar with the Bible, that a couple of fellows by the names of Paul and Silas got locked up in a place like this a long time ago. Only they were beaten bloody first. But for some reason that didn't get 'em down. They spent the night singing songs of praise to God. Somewhere in the middle of the night, an angel caused an earthquake that opened all the prison doors and caused their chains to fall off.

Great plan except for two things, no three: First, I didn't have any chains; they already took them off. Second, even if they let me out of prison, I needed off the merry-go-round. I needed to find a way out of Arken and back to my home planet. And finally, as you will recall, I don't sing.

I once read a book about this autistic guy. Whenever he was stressed, he would zone everything and everyone out and try to remember all the prime numbers.

Two, three, five, seven, eleven, thirteen, seventeen, nineteen, 23, 29, 31, 37, 41, 43, 47, 53, 59, 61, 67, 71. Let me see, 79, 83. No, I missed 73.

This is harder than it looks.

I read somewhere once that they came up with a prime number that had 17 million digits in it. I'm not sure how and why that's useful to know, but, hey, who am I to judge?

I think there must be some kind of trick to sleeping successfully with fleas, and I'm not sure I figured it out. Anyway, I woke up several times. And it wasn't exactly quiet. One of the prisoners was screaming that his leg was falling off, and the guards were busy telling dirty jokes.

Kinda reminds me of this house I once stayed at for a week in Caledonia, Ohio. Right next to the railroad tracks. If you look up Caledonia—if it's even big enough to be on Google Maps—you'll see that it doesn't qualify as a place big enough to slow down the freight trains that came roaring through the town at 65 miles per hour all day and all night. Every time a train went through, the whole house shook. My first night there I woke up seventeen times. I know. I counted. But it got better. The second night was three times, the third night once, and after that I slept on through.

I guess you can get used to anything.

Although I would really prefer not to sleep right next to my toilet, especially when it doesn't flush.

I have to admit, I wasn't my usual perky self in the morning.

But then something happened that pulled my attention away from how miserable I felt. There was some kind of commotion outside.

"No visitors allowed!" It was the shrill voice of one of the guards.

I looked out my window.

"Where's the warden?" a commanding voice boomed. *Wait, I know that voice.* It was Cedric!

I looked out the barred window of my door. Cedric and the warden came into view at exactly the same moment, from opposite sides of the room. The warden was pulling on his shirt and was accompanied by four guards. Cedric, as always, was in full battle gear.

"How dare you!" the warden screamed.

Cedric walked up to him and stood there chin to chin. "I will see Straight Arrow now," he said calmly.

“No. No visitors allowed,” the warden said. His face was red with rage. I think he would have said more, but at that moment Cedric lifted him off his feet and held him up in the air like a father might hold a newborn baby.

Cedric was speaking. “You tell your men to take their hands off their weapons and step back or I will break every bone in your body, and then I will start on them.”

The warden’s face turned from red to white. “Do it,” he squeaked.

The men stepped back. Cedric casually threw the warden across the room, and he landed in a tangled heap.

Cedric turned slowly around. Then he spoke again. “I am a knight of Arken. I stand before the king, and I am here on his authority. I will visit here any time I wish day or night, and I am in command here. All of you,” here he looked at the warden, “particularly you will take orders from me without question. Is this understood?”

“Yes, my lord,” the warden mumbled.

“Fine,” Cedric said. “Now, bring Straight Arrow to me.”

Two of the guards rushed to my cell door. There was fumbling with a key, and then the metal door swung open.

Cedric walked over. I was about to shake his hand, when he embraced me with a great bear hug that lifted me off my feet and took my breath away.

“Straight Arrow, my friend,” he said after he put me down. “Are you well?”

I nodded as I tried to catch my breath.

Then Cedric looked past me to my cell. I should have folded up my blankets. What was I thinking?

“Are they keeping you in here?” he asked me.

Again I nodded.

Anger clouded Cedric’s face. He turned away from me and shouted, “Warden!”

The warden slinked over to stand before him.

“Do you not know who this man is?” Cedric demanded.

“No, my lord,” the warden said.

“This is Straight Arrow from Prairie of the Sun. He is of Ipatchy and Sue ancestry. He is a hero of Arken. He saved the king’s life, and his wife, Dove Fogico, saved my life.” (I knew this was an exaggeration, but I had to admit I was enjoying the show.) “This man is your superior. He is being detained until his name can be cleared in connection with the disappearance of the king’s daughter—and I have no doubt that his name will be cleared. When it is, he will take his rightful place as chief archer of Arken and protector of the king.”

Ouch!

I thought about speaking up and saying that I was just a humble storekeeper in Sun Prairie, but something told me I should keep my mouth shut.

“What is he doing in this cell?” Cedric was still speaking.

The warden started to babble something about overcrowding and space constraints, but Cedric cut him off.

“Enough! You will give us a tour. I will choose his cell.”

Cedric demanded to see everything, including the places they didn’t want to show us. That’s how I ended up getting the guard’s break room as my cell. I know, I know. It’s not in a cellblock. That didn’t seem to concern Cedric. And, yes, there’s no lock on the door. But Cedric said, “Straight Arrow is a man

of honor. His word is stronger than any lock you can install.” Then he asked me, “Straight Arrow, do I have your word of honor that you will not attempt to escape.”

All I could say was yes.

(I didn’t want my feet cut off anyway.)

So I got a room with a bunk, a table and chair, a candle, a closet (which I quickly converted into my own private bathroom), and a window with a nice view of the castle courtyard. Cedric also informed them that my meals would be delivered to me from the king’s own kitchen three times a day, so they could give their stale bread and watery broth to someone else.

Not bad for my second day in prison.

In fact, it was a step up from college where I lived in the dorm and had to share a room with a guy from Germany. Not that he was a bad sort—I liked him quite a bit actually. But then he got married, and they had a baby. I later learned that they were on a ship that sunk in the Strait of Magellen.

By comparison, I had it pretty good, even though I had the impression that the guards didn’t like me.

Chapter 11

I'm not good with names. In fact, I have a neighbor across the street in Sun Prairie that I've met five times, and I still can't remember his name. This creates problems.

I once read that Napoleon never forgot a name. He'd meet you once, write down your name, and remember it forever. I guess it worked pretty good for him, at least until he got to Waterloo.

As bad as I am with names, for some reason I got Threadbar's name on the first try. He was my janitor. I mean, not just mine—he cleaned everybody's toilet. Since we were in the same line of work, we had a chance to talk shop.

Me: "So what kind of chemicals do they give you for your job?"

Threadbar: "Chemicals, Mr. Arrow?"

Me: "I keep a strong acid cleaner for the really stubborn toilets—I mean if they have a nasty ring. But for everyday use, I keep a broad spectrum germicidal. I try to remember to use a separate swab for the acid cleaner. They say there's no bleach in the germicidal, but I don't believe it. There's gotta be bleach. And you know what happens when you mix acid with bleach. You get a whiff of that, and you might as well kiss Mother Earth goodbye."

Threadbar: "As you say, Mr. Arrow."

Me: "So ... what's in your arsenal?"

Threadbar: (laughing) “Oh, no, Mr. Arrow. They don’t let me anywhere near the armory.”

I think we have a vocabulary problem.

I read someplace that a couple of surgeons did surgery on a person with a collapsed lung while they were all in an airplane traveling something like 580 mph. I think the patient got into a motorcycle accident in India (which I understand is easy to do) just before boarding the plane. With the collapsed lung the pilot couldn’t land without killing the patient. So they stayed at 35,000 feet, and the surgeons used some kind of knife (who knows where they got that) and a couple of drinking straws. They sterilized all the surgical instruments with ... can you guess? ... brandy!

I mention all of this because I got the distinct impression that God wanted me to shake Threadbar’s hand after he completed his service. Being a first class germophobe, and not having soap or a sink, not having any hand sanitizer (Germ X people, are you listening? There’s a wide open market in Arken—if you can figure out how to get there.) —I wasn’t too excited about it. But I couldn’t get away from it, so I shook his hand.

I understand that Donald Trump hates shaking hands. I hear you, Mr. Trump. Why can’t we just bow like they do in the Far East? No wonder China’s economy is growing so quickly—fewer sick days.

Anyway, I shook his hand, and afterward he bowed. When he stood up, he said, “It’s an honor to serve you, Mr. Arrow.” And I’m not really sure, but it almost looked like there were tears in his eyes.

What did I do? Clearly I made some kind of impression on him, but how or why I don’t know.

I didn't have time to find out because he left abruptly, and then it was just me standing there with my germ-infested hand trying to figure out what to do next.

Fecal coliform. I think Mythbusters did a show on that. If I remember correctly, they discovered that it's everywhere. (If that was supposed to reassure me, it didn't.) But they also discovered that the dirtiest place in your house is not the toilet seat as you might imagine, but rather the kitchen sponge. You'd be further ahead power washing your dishes, which in my mind isn't a bad idea. I mean why not? You just put all the dishes in a cage, give 'em a couple passes with the power washer, and there you go! Of course you need to install a drain on your kitchen floor, but how hard can that be? In fact, if kitchen cabinets were made from wire mesh, you could put your dishes away *before* you wash them.

I think Dove likes the idea too, because when I told her about it she laughed and called me a medical miracle. I should have been an inventor.

I was thinking about Dove and me in the perfect kitchen when the kitchen crew showed up with my evening meal.

I stood there for a moment trying to figure out how to eat the castle food with germ filled hands, when I noticed something wonderful.

Brandy!

They had brandy to drink. Along with tea. (Ick!) Actually, ick to both. I can't stand the taste of alcohol. Sorry to disappoint you, if you were planning to take me out for a round of drinks.

But brandy was the best substitute for Germ X in the whole kingdom of Arken. So at least my hands were clean again, even if I did need to drink tea. On the plus side, I was pretty sure

that the tea had been boiled. No sense getting dysentery. Never trust the water. You know.

Over the next few days, Cedric popped in at odd hours day and night. I think he was keeping Mr. Warden and his goons on their toes. But they didn't bother me. In fact, they did their best to ignore me. They never put a lock on my door, and I never went outside my room without permission. So it all worked out. I kept asking Cedric for news about the search for Dove, and, of course, the princess, but he just shook his head. "No word yet," was all he said.

Besides Cedric, my only real companion was Threadbar. Once a day, he stopped by to provide the Tower of Arken's version of janitorial services.

Here I need to digress. Sitting in my cell all day long with only one regular visitor got me thinking about all kinds of things. For one thing, on my home planet, I do Threadbar's job. I'm a janitor, cleaning other people's toilets while they sleep.

In the American caste system that puts me pretty low on the totem pole, about a step below strippers and fast food fry cooks. Nobody says it aloud, but people think it: *I have two new cars in the garage of my 5,000 square foot home in an upscale subdivision, and you're just a janitor. People look up to me, but you—you're replaceable, expendable, unimportant.*

I know the rest of the world pretends we don't know this—but we do.

Just to be honest, it wears on us. We try to take it all in good humor and soldier on, but I don't know. I think the real price of success is not the hard work and the sacrifice.

It's contempt. It's disdain for everyone who's "beneath" you.

I wish Dove were here. She always knows what to say when I get down like this. “Crazy Horse,” she says, “you’re a medical miracle.”

I don’t know what that means, but it makes me feel better.

Anyway, Threadbar and I became buddies. He talked to me about doing time, which, in his case, was related to a long story about incurring a debt to a nobleman—a debt he couldn’t pay. He had a daughter. She was ten or eleven, but he hadn’t seen her for three winters.

The whole thing made me angry, but what are you going to do?

Of course, I don’t know if he was telling the truth or not. This is, after all, a prison. Sources can be less than reliable.

I had a friend once who was a parole officer. He said something to me about his parolees that stuck with me: “I always believed them, even when I knew they were lying.”

I get that.

There’s something about a good story that makes fact finding seem almost sacrilegious.

Besides, I liked Threadbar, and I wanted to help him.

But trust is a crazy thing. One day Threadbar came in with a story, and I had to make a decision. Was he telling me the truth? Or was it pure BS?

Let me tell you what he told me, and you can decide:

After looking up and down the hallway, here’s what he delivered to me in breathless whispers: “Mr. Arrow, I trust you. That may be the end of me, if you are an agent of the enemy, but I will trust that you are not. Surely you know that Shad-on of Goraudok keeps agents throughout the castle. Nobody

knows how many. Nobody knows exactly who all of them are. There are agents right here in the Tower—at least one of the guards, at least one of the prisoners.”

He was cleaning my port-a-pot as he talked, but he paused here to check the hallway again. “I overhear things, Mr. Arrow, doing my job. I do. I know a lot—things I’m not supposed to know, but I do know them. I listen, but I don’t talk. I smile and clean the pots, and no one is the wiser. They all think Threadbar doesn’t know, but he does.”

I nodded. I could relate.

“The king’s sister is clean, but her son’s nanny is not. She is bought and paid for by Shad-on himself.”

“How do you know?” I asked.

“I don’t have time,” he said. “If I’m here too long, people ask questions. Trust me. I know. The nanny is an agent of Gorau-dok.”

“What does she want?” I asked.

“She intends to murder the king.”

Wow. Talk about on-the-job stress. For the king, I mean. “How?” I asked.

“The king’s nephew. It’s his fourth birthday tomorrow. She has labored on a coat for the lad. She will dress him in the coat just before his birthday celebration with the king. Embedded in the coat are needles and hooks laced with their slow acting poison. The king will pick up the lad and swing him around, as a man might pick up his son. That will be his death. The nanny has been studying how the king holds the lad. The needles are exactly in place. If even one pierces his skin, he will die a slow death. Everyone will think it’s disease, but it isn’t. It’s poison.”

Wow. No wonder the president needs the Secret Service. You could get paranoid just thinking about this stuff.

“Of course, the nanny doesn’t care if the boy dies too, or his mother, his father, or anyone else.”

Okay. Mary Poppins from hell is going to murder the king. It goes down tomorrow. Assuming this whole thing isn’t a crock of ... well, you know.

What do I do?

Do I (a) thank Threadbar and forget it, (b) tell a guard and risk that the guard might be a Goraudok agent, or (c) hope Cedric shows up so I can tell him?

And here’s a happy thought: *Since there’s so much poisoning going around, how do I know that I haven’t already been poisoned?*

If I’m poisoned here in Arken and make it back to Sun Prairie, will I still be poisoned? Do they have the antidote back in my world?

And what happens to me if I die here in Arken? Do I go to Arken’s version of heaven or to my own? Or are they one and the same?

I don’t know about you, but sometimes when I pray, I get the distinct idea that God is trying to say something to me in return. And when I started praying about all of this, one thought came clearly into focus:

You have the power to save the king.

Me. Straight Arrow from West Main Street, Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, USA.

To save the king, I needed to reach Cedric. But how?

I started hollering for the guards. Keep in mind that I was occupying their break room and that Cedric threw their boss

across the prison. So I wasn't exactly Mr. Popular with the guards. But eventually, about the time my voice got hoarse, one of them showed up.

He looked like something out of a Charles Dickens movie. Missing teeth, leathery skin, a patch over one eye.

"Whadya wan, Arrow?"

"I need to speak to Lord Cedric immediately!"

"What for?"

Here things get awkward. Everything inside screamed, *Don't trust the guard!*

"I can't really say," I said.

"Then I can't really help you, can I?" he said.

He turned and walked away. The conversation was over.

That didn't go so well.

I gave it another try with the kitchen staff when they delivered supper. They were equally uncooperative, although they were more polite about it. "We are so sorry, Mr. Arrow." "We are not to mingle with the knights of Arken, Mr. Arrow." "We are not to carry messages, Mr. Arrow." Yada yada.

"Please, please, please," I begged, but that didn't seem to phase them. Not my job. Not my department. I get off work at five. Whatever.

Great.

There was my meal, complete with blueberry pie—my favorite—but I wasn't hungry. I picked up the pie server and held it in

my hand. Polished so clear I could see my own reflection in it. Probably solid silver. I set it down, and started pacing my cell, nine steps long, five steps wide, back and forth, back and forth, then around the perimeter.

I looked up to heaven. “You know, I’m trying to do what You want me to, but I don’t see how You can say it’s within my power to save the king. I’m locked up, and I can’t even get a message to Cedric. It’s not as though I can text him, or send him an email or something.”

Sometimes God expects a lot.

That’s when my eyes went to the window. It was a small window, and the view wasn’t very good, but I could look out of it. For some reason I was drawn to it, so I climbed up on my bunk and looked out.

There he was. There was Cedric. As big as life, in the courtyard far below.

I pounded on the window.

He didn’t look up.

I yelled.

No response, except one of the guards hollered down the corridor, “Shut your yapper, Arrow.”

I stared at Cedric. How to get a message to him? As I pondered this, the sun broke through the clouds on its way to the evening horizon. It was so bright I was temporarily blinded. I shielded my hands with my eyes.

Then I had it.

The pie server. My mind went back to some survival show I watched. Was it Bear Grylls, David Canterbury, Cody Lundin

or Les Stroud? I couldn't remember, but one of those survival guys talked about signalling with a mirror.

I focused a reflected beam of the sun's light on the far wall, and carefully adjusted the mirror so the light traveled across the courtyard passing across Cedric's face.

One, two, three.

One, two, three.

One, two, three.

Universal sign of distress. At least on planet earth. Who knows what it is on Arken.

One, two, three.

Cedric was looking up. He was waving. He was coming this way!

Chapter 12

“You’ve done Arken a great service,” Cedric said to me when I finished telling him the whole story.

“Threadbar was the one who found out,” I said. I mean, you just wanna give credit where credit is due.

Cedric nodded. He seemed lost in thought for a few moments. Then his face brightened, and he said, “Now we tell the king!”

“We?” I asked.

“Yes,” Cedric was smiling. “We. Say goodbye to the Tower of Arken.”

“Huh?”

“Your incarceration here has served its purpose.”

I still didn’t get it.

“Can I say goodbye to Threadbar?”

Cedric shook his head. “No. You may see him again, but for now, don’t speak to him if you see him, don’t mention his name until we reach the king, and don’t acknowledge him in any way.”

Weird. But okay, I guess. Just the way things are done. Here in Arken that is.

I don't know if there was some kind of sign out procedure when a prisoner leaves the Tower of Arken, but, if there was, Cedric didn't follow it. He wasn't big on red tape. He just made it clear that if they didn't open the door to let him—and me—through, he would use them to break down the door.

Okay, I guess I've watched too much television, but it just seemed a little weird to me that Cedric wanted to make sure that the only people who knew that Threadbar told me this little secret was him and me. You know the drill. Cedric takes me out back, and I'm history. I mean, this guy is a professional killer.

So I hate to tell you this, folks, but I might not make it back to Sun Prairie. Very soon I may be dead.

But then, what's a guy supposed to do? Holler to the world, "The nephew's nanny is going to knock off the king. I heard it from the prison janitor."

The problem with life is that the owner's manual doesn't cover the stuff that comes up. You just gotta figure it out for yourself.

So I kept my yapper shut, to borrow a phrase from my favorite guard.

I followed Cedric through narrow hallways and up and down winding staircases. Every so often we came to some kind of guard station. Twice these guards patted me down. Once they wanted to strip search me, but Cedric talked them out of it. Then a door opened, and there in a chair sat the king.

Cedric bowed, and I stood there like an idiot with my mouth hanging open. Cedric looked over at me; I remembered my manners and bowed with him.

“Ah yes, Lord Cedric and Sir Arrow. Join me.” He didn’t seem at all surprised to see me. Instead, he motioned to a couple chairs at the table. A guard closed the heavy door, and we were alone with the king.

The king looked at me. “I understand you have a message for me,” he said.

News travels fast.

The king listened carefully as I informed him of the plot to assassinate him with a four year old boy’s new coat. But he didn’t ask any of the questions I expected him to ask.

“This man you call Threadbar,” he said, “how would you describe him? Did he have any identifying marks? How old would you say he is? What did his voice sound like?”

I struggled through that the best I could, though I couldn’t for the life of me figure out why it mattered. Did the king want to give Threadbar some kind of reward? Would he forgive or even pay his debt to the nobleman so that he could be released from prison? I was going to ask, and then decided it was none of my business.

The king sat back and smiled. “So,” he said, “Nanny Kateryn wants to use little Humphrey to murder her king. You’ve done well, Straight Arrow. By this time tomorrow, your position as Archer of Arken and Protector of the King will be restored. Either that or you will be hanged. But I cannot allow you to spend the night in the Tower of Arken. No, you will pass the night in the company of Cedric.”

Good gravy, it’s nerve wracking to hang out with people who have this much power.

“I am at your service, Your Majesty,” I said. I read that in a book someplace, and I hoped it was the right thing to say.

The king dismissed us. We bowed again, and took our leave.

We took a late evening supper in Cedric’s quarters since I had left mine uneaten in my jail cell. Then we walked down to the stables together and said goodnight to Manford the horse. I fed him an apple, and got rewarded with horse slobber all over my hand. (Where’s that brandy?) When we returned to Cedric’s quarters two men were there.

When Cedric didn’t bother to introduce them, I shook hands with them and gave my name. “Straight Arrow,” I told them and waited for their names in return.

“We know,” was the only reply I got.

I looked at Cedric. He said, “It’s a night of danger, Straight Arrow. The king has ordered added security.”

It looked like we weren’t going to spend the night playing cards and telling stories, so I stretched out on my bunk, and let Batman and Robin do their thing—keeping watch or murdering me in my sleep or whatever.

Did you ever have one of those nights when you just couldn’t sleep? I mean Cedric was snoring away. Evidently, the two spooks didn’t bother him at all. But they made me nervous. Plus, everything was just catching up with me.

A long time ago I made the decision not to go into the army. Don’t get me wrong. The army is a good gig, everybody should serve their country some way or another, and the army is a great choice. But I just figured it wasn’t a good fit for me. I mean, can you imagine me marching in a straight line?

I mention this to you because, well, I never went through boot camp or any other kind of training or conditioning that's supposed to get you ready for battle, and now I've already been in a battle, and I killed two men. I mean I killed them. I shot them, and they stopped breathing. Cedric killed another one who was trying to kill me. Close your eyes, think about that, and try to get to sleep!

On top of that, I just got out of prison. I mean, I had never been arrested before this. In fact, I never even got a speeding ticket. I got pulled over once for driving while intoxicated, but that was all a big mistake. When the officer asked me if I had been drinking a lot, I thought he asked if I had been driving a lot. I don't know. Forty-five minutes seemed like a lot to me. So there was a failure to communicate.

The point is: I've never been arrested. No speeding tickets. A couple parking tickets. And, well, there was the time I was pulled over for stealing a truck, but that was also a mix up. We were in Chicago. I was helping a friend move. And we wanted to return the rental truck so we wouldn't get charged for another day. We pulled into this U-Haul place that was about the size of Texas, and drove around until we found the office. It was closed. I guess these places don't stay open after ten o'clock at night. So we pulled out of the lot just in time to be stopped by a couple of female Chicago police officers. They came up to us on both sides of the truck with flashlights in one hand and the other hand on their sidearms. When they asked what we were doing, my friend said, "I'm trying to get rid of this truck." Another failure to communicate.

I'm just a sheltered guy from Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, and all of a sudden I'm in battle killing people, I get thrown in prison, the king wants to make me his personal bodyguard or hang me—I'm not clear which. On top of that, the person I care about

most in the whole world is missing, and there isn't a thing I can do about it. Can you see how all of this could be stressful?

But Cedric snored on, so finally at three or four in the morning I drifted off.

I woke up to Cedric shaking me. "Time to go, Straight Arrow."

We gnawed on some hard bread and called that breakfast. Sheesh. Hasn't anybody in this place ever heard of cornflakes with sliced bananas and two-percent milk? My stomach was still growling when we got up from the table. What I wouldn't give for a blueberry danish from Lane's Bakery in Madison!

But we were in motion. As we walked, Cedric filled me in. We were to attend a morning briefing with the king. Then Humphrey's birthday party. This was awkward. I was going to a birthday party, and I didn't have a gift to give. (I have the perfect arrowhead for a four year old boy back at my shop.) But Cedric told me not to worry about it.

The briefing was a scene straight out of Henry V with the king sitting on a raised platform surrounded by his knights.

A guard searched me for weapons, and then Cedric and I were ushered in and stood before the group.

"Five days ago," the king began ignoring Cedric and looking straight at me, "we located the princess and your wife."

My jaw dropped. For a long moment I couldn't breathe. Then the words tumbled out. "Is she ... are they ... are they okay? Can I see Dove? Where is she?" Tears were forming in my eyes.

The king's didn't answer. Instead, he seemed to be studying me, but his expression was difficult for me to read. Was he angry? Was he sad?

Finally, he spoke. “A messenger from the Kingdom of Gorau-dok arrived five days ago saying that they are being held prisoner in that land. Shad-on, the ruler of Goraudok, wants to trade the princess for territorial concessions.” He paused, and then looked at me again. “What do you think we should do, Straight Arrow?”

My mind went to Osama Bin Laden. The answer seemed obvious to me. You send in the Navy Seals, and let them do what they do best.

“Go and get them?” I phrased my answer as a question, because, hey, what do I know. But why sit around and make concessions to some small time Hitler?

The king smiled and nodded. “A man of action,” he said. “Choose the direct path. But don’t you think you’re forgetting something?”

This was like being interviewed on 20/20. All the questions seem innocent, until you answer them. But I didn’t study for this test, and I had no idea how to answer.

“I’m clueless,” I admitted.

“Verification. We need to verify they are alive, and that they are indeed being held by Shad-on.”

Ah, yes. The old photo with today’s newspaper in it. Why didn’t I think of that?

The king was still talking. “That’s why I sent one of the maids back to Goraudok with the messenger. That was five days ago. I have reason to believe the messenger and the maid will be returning today.”

“What happens then?” I asked.

“We listen,” the king said. Then he changed the subject. “You will be attending my nephew’s birthday party today, Straight Arrow.”

“Yes, Your Honor,” I said.

“And today I make a decision. Are you a friend of Arken, or an enemy?”

I nodded. I wished I could think of the right thing to say in a situation like that, something like, “I trust Your Majesty’s judgment and discernment to uncover the truth about me.” But instead I just stood there, mute as a lamb about to be slaughtered.

Cedric was bowing again, so I followed his lead. I think the king said something to dismiss us, but I’m not sure. My head was spinning, and I just followed Cedric out of there.

After we left the king’s court, and Cedric and I were alone, I asked him, “Did you know? Did you know about the messenger from Goraudok? Did you know about the princess and Dove?”

“Yes,” he said.

I nodded. I was going to ask him why he didn’t tell me, but just as I decided not to, he added this:

“The king didn’t want you or anyone else to know until today.”

Okay. I guess the king doesn’t really trust me. I guess I can be okay with that. No, I’m not really okay with that. Why doesn’t he trust me? What have I done wrong? I had to ask.

“Why does the king still think I could be an enemy of Arken?”

Cedric answered without hesitation. “In the last year, five attempts were made on the king’s life. That doesn’t even count

another dozen plots against him we uncovered. He is wise to be cautious.”

Wow. Remind me never to be king. I mean you can complain all you want about cleaning toilets, but how many janitors are targeted for assassination? And how many owners of arrow-head shops are murdered? I'd hate to see the worker's compensation bill for kings. It's gotta be off the charts.

I'm not much of a party guy. I don't drink. I don't know how to dance. I'm no good at striking up conversations with people I don't know. I don't like eating while I'm standing up. Sorry, I'm just not good at it.

But the advantage to birthday parties is birthday cake, so I did have something to look forward to, especially after that breakfast.

Unfortunately, Arken doesn't seem to know about birthday cakes. They did have something that looked and tasted a lot like pumpkin pie, however, so it wasn't a total dietary disaster.

I say that because I snuck a piece before the action began.

Okay, here's how it went down, and I don't blame you if you don't believe me. First of all, you need to know that the walls of this party room were lined with these bouncer / bodyguard types—you know what I mean, linebackers endowed with more muscle than a human being knows what to do with. There were tables and people everywhere, but the guest of honor hadn't yet arrived.

Cedric and I were stationed by ourselves near a door where we could see into a large back room. I sat down on a chair and worked my way most of the way through that slice of pumpkin pie before I realized that the king was standing over me.

Do I stand? Where's Emily Post when you need her? I stood. It seemed like the right thing to do.

"I am so sorry, Your Majesty. I didn't see you."

"No harm, Sir Arrow, no harm. I bring you news."

Dove. He has news about Dove.

"We did a sweep this morning. We arrested over a dozen spies from Goraudok. Nanny Kateryn is the only one still free."

No news about Dove.

"Does that disappoint you, Straight Arrow?" the king asked, his expression turning hard.

"Oh, I am so sorry, Your Honor. No. Of course not. We are all safer; and I am thankful for that. I was just hoping you had news about Dove, that's all. I mean the princess and Dove, of course."

The king's face softened. "Patience. We should have word soon."

Then the king and his bodyguards slipped past us into the back room and then out through an exit.

Moments later, the birthday boy arrived, wearing a purple coat with some kind of gold trim. I have no sense of style, but I would say it was definitely a step up from say a cub scout uniform.

He was flanked by two women and followed by a man. I'm guessing we were looking at mommy, daddy and nanny.

What happened next was very well choreographed. A woman with a voice that would penetrate a hurricane called out, "What a beautiful coat, Humphrey. Did your nanny make that?"

Humphrey nodded.

Ms. Megaphone continued. “Kateryn, you’ve outdone yourself. What beautiful work.” As she spoke three or four people gathered around the poisonous nanny to engage her in conversation. Meanwhile, with Humphrey’s mother holding his hand, a kitchen worker offered him a cookie.

“Follow me.”

The kitchen employee, with Humphrey and his coat of many poisons in tow, walked past Cedric and me into the back room. As soon as Humphrey was out of sight of the main room, the kitchen hand said to him, “I’ll have that cookie for you in just a minute. But first, your uncle the king has a special present for you.”

Then someone walked into the back room with a small suit of chainmail armor, a helmet and some boots.

Humphrey’s eyes popped open. Evidently this was a big deal for a four year old boy in Arken.

A man wearing gloves helped Humphrey out of his coat, his shirt and his trousers, until he was stripped to his underwear.

“Oh, I think there’s a pin in here,” the man said to the boy. “You didn’t get poked did you?”

Humphrey laughed and shook his head. Then another man—I found out he was the king’s tailor—helped Humphrey into another set of clothes and into the armor. The cookie was produced, and while Humphrey munched on it, the king walked in, picked up Humphrey and spun him around 360. Clearly these two liked each other a lot.

“One more surprise,” the king said to his nephew. “Knight Harold will take you for a ride on a genuine war horse.”

The little boy was literally dancing with delight.

But the moment Humphrey was out of the back exit with Knight Harold, the little boy's coat was thrown on a table and six men all wearing gloves stood over it examining it carefully. Altogether, they pulled out six barbs. An old man set up shop with a couple bottles, a cloth and a flame.

The king watched with interest as the man did his work. "A derivative of wolfsbane, Your Majesty. Lethal but not immediately fatal. You would be sick in a day, dead in a week."

While all this was going on, a group of practiced conversation-ists kept Nanny Kateryn fully occupied. Every time she tried to break free, someone cornered her with small talk. But she could not see or hear any of the scene I was witnessing in the back room.

At that point, the king entered the party room. As he walked past us, Cedric joined him, walking on his right, another body-guard on his left. I walked beside Cedric, as we all made our way to the center of the room where Nanny Kateryn was standing.

All conversation stopped. Everyone stood facing the king.

"Nanny Kateryn," the king said in his rich voice that filled the room. "You've outdone yourself."

Kateryn bowed. "Your Majesty?" she asked.

"The coat you created for Humphrey. It's beautiful. A work of art."

"Thank you, Your Majesty. Humphrey is wonderful boy."

"Yes, he is," the king said steadily. "which makes me wonder why you would use him as a murder weapon."

I saw the color drain from Kateryn's face.

“Straight Arrow,” the king said to me without taking his eyes off the nanny. “Kateryn looks ill. Would you find a chair for her.”

“Murder, Your Majesty,” Kateryn said in a strained voice.

There were chairs everywhere. I just had to find one. They were all high backed, made from solid oak or some such wood, and they were hefty, let me tell you. But I managed to pull one out from the table, and started in Kateryn’s direction.

The king spoke. “We found the needles, Kateryn. We tested them. We found the wolfsbane. Your confederates were arrested an hour ago. They, like you, will be hanged.”

“No, please, Your Majesty,” Kateryn said, falling to her knees.

Was she going to need this chair or not? It was caught on the corner of the table, and I was tugging to get it free. Look, I’ve never been the most graceful guy in the world. Let’s get real. I’m a klutz, and I know it.

But with one final tug, I pulled the chair free, lost my balance, fell to the floor, and the chair went right over my head.

When the chair hit the floor, Kateryn’s throwing knife was deeply embedded in it. She had pulled it from her boot, and it was in the air, spinning its way to the king’s throat before anyone had a chance to stop her.

She threw the knife.

I threw the chair.

Chair stopped the knife.

The king lives to see another day.

I felt like a cross between Tom Cruise and Peter Sellers.

Strong arms pinned her to the ground. She was bound, and four guards marched her away.

The king himself helped me to my feet.

The king looked into my eyes. "Twice now, you have saved my life, Sir Arrow. I will never doubt you again."

Hub?

I think this means I'm not going to get hanged. That's a good feeling.

In the meal that followed, Cedric, the knights, and even the king toasted my health, and welcomed me as the Archer of Arken, Protector of the Kingdom. (Good grief!) Just to be polite I took a little sip of whatever alcoholic concoction they put in my cup.

Yuck!

Chapter 13

The messenger from Goraudok arrived about a half hour after the birthday party was over. A very happy little Humphrey went home dressed in armor, and his nanny was on her way to the gallows.

We were to meet the foreign ambassador back in the king's court. On the way, Cedric whispered in my ear, bringing me up to speed. The men of Goraudok, he told me, think more highly of their dogs than they do of their women. That was the reason the king sent a woman to Goraudok to verify that the princess and Dove were there. Had he sent a man, Shad-on would have kept him there as an additional hostage. But, by sending a woman, the king was sure she would be returned, because the Goraudok king would never guess that she had any value as a bargaining chip. In reality, the woman the king sent was some kind of prodigy with a photographic memory. He figured that would come in handy if we had to send someone in to rescue Dove and the king's daughter.

When we arrived at the king's court, I discovered that chairs had been provided for Cedric and myself, next to each other, in that semicircle on either side of the king. Leaning against my chair was "my" bow and the quiver full of arrows. I say "my" loosely, because before I came to Arken, I had never seen this weapon before.

I hope they don't ask me to shoot anything.

The king, having narrowly escaped another assassination attempt in the morning, ordered that the messenger be thoroughly searched not once but twice before presenting himself to the royal court. I'm guessing that may have put the messenger in a sour mood, because he was not what you would call warm and fuzzy. Or possibly he was upset that none of the Goraudok assassins had managed yet to kill the king.

He stood in the middle of the court with his feet planted wide apart trying his best to look like the big bad wolf in the story of the Three Little Pigs.

“My master, Lord of Goraudok, the great Shad-on, has this to say to the Arken king.” The speaker looked past us, like it was beneath his dignity to look anyone in the eye. “In five days time, you are to meet the Lord Shad-on at the watchtower on the Hill of Beneger. You are to come alone, and unarmed. You will sign over the territories of Castelrivet and Kerck Harm. This is nonnegotiable. Then and only then will your daughter be returned.”

What about Dove?

I wanted to say something, but figured I should keep my mouth shut.

The king spoke with the even voice of someone who was clearly in control. “We will respond to your request after we hear the report of the Maid Tana. Meanwhile, my men will give you a tour of our stables so you can see that your horse is being properly cared for.”

Big bad wolf looked like he was going to object, but two huge Arken knights stood up and eight castle guards closed ranks behind them. They marched Mr. Wolfie out like he was a little boy who got caught with his hands in the cookie jar.

Cedric leaned over and whispered to me, “The stables are on the other side of the courtyard. He won’t be able to hear us. Plus, sending him to the stables was in keeping with the arrogance of his delivery. He is a messenger, but he should treat his superiors with deference.”

Once Big Bad Messenger was out of earshot, the room erupted.

“Castelrivet and Kerck Harm! That would leave Arken defenseless! He might as well ask for the whole kingdom!” “You won’t do it, will you, Your Majesty?” “The nerve of Shad-on, demanding you come alone and unarmed!” And so on.

The king held up his hand for silence. “We listen to Tana’s report. Then we decide.”

At a signal from the king, a door was opened, and in walked the Maid Tana.

I don’t know what I was expecting, but things got very quiet very quickly. Remember that haunting photo of an Afghan refugee girl on the June 1985 cover of *National Geographic*? Remember her eyes?

That was Tana.

“Daughter of Arken ... ” The king was talking. “... you’ve been harmed.”

A single tear streamed down. You could see Tana taking in deep breaths as she fought against sobbing.

Finally, she spoke. “I begged him, Your Majesty. I said, ‘Do it to me.’ I said, ‘Do not touch.’ I said, ‘Do not touch the king’s daughter ... the princess.’ I begged him. I fell on my knees. He only laughed.”

“Who was it, Tana?”

“The one they call Shad-on.”

The king said nothing for a long moment. Then he spoke.

“Shad-on took away the honor ... of my daughter?”

Tana nodded.

“And he forced you to watch?”

Tears were flowing freely as the Maid Tana stood mute before the king.

All around the room I could see men reaching for their weapons.

The king was silent for a long time. No one dared to speak.

Finally he broke the silence. “You have suffered, my sister. I did not mean for this to happen to you. I know this is painful, but I need to know. Did anyone touch you?”

Tana looked down, but did not answer.

“Was it the messenger?” the king asked.

Tana nodded.

“How many times?”

A long pause, and then a barely audible whisper. “Three.”

The king stood up, and instantly all the men in the room stood with him. He walked forward and wrapped his arms around the maid. “I am sorry, my sister,” he said. “I am so sorry.”

After a moment, the king stepped back, looked up, and spoke to a young page. “Bring Paula of Rhone. She has a mother’s heart and a healing voice.”

As the page disappeared through an exit door, the king turned to me. Looking at me, he continued to speak to Tana.

“And what of Lady Dove Fogico? Did you see her? Was she harmed?”

For the first time, Tana smiled. You could hear the defiance in her voice. “They are afraid of her, Your Majesty. They have her locked in a cell within a cell. They call her a witch, and no one is permitted to touch her. They are afraid.”

The king nodded. “And well they should be. We will give them more to fear, you can be sure of that. Daughter of Arken, you are with your brothers now. We shall keep you safe.”

At the king’s command, a chair was brought for Tana, and chairs were rearranged so she sat behind the knights with a fully armed knight seated on her right and on her left.

“I need to ask one more question,” the king said to her. “Can you describe completely the place where the princess and Lady Dove are held? Can you draw the plan of the city, and the plan of the prison?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Good,” the king said.

Another page was sent and in a few minutes the messenger from Goraudok was back in the king’s court.

“I am not accustomed ...” he started to say, but the king cut him off.

“We gave you a simple task. You were to take this maid to your land where she would verify the information you provided. Then you were to return. You stood before me and personally guaranteed her safety. What makes you think you could use her for your own pleasure?”

Mr. Messenger stiffened. “What business is it of yours, if I use Arken meat or some other meat. And I don’t take orders ...”

“SILENCE!” the king roared.

Then he continued in a quiet, even voice. “You have broken your oath. You have violated our sister. You have forfeited your immunity, and you are stripped of your status as a diplomatic messenger.”

For the first time, I saw fear in the eyes of the man from Goraudok.

The king looked at Cedric and said, “He needs to be alive and awake when you finish.”

All the men stood. Cedric walked over to Shad-on’s servant, picked him up—all 240 or 250 pounds, and threw him across the room against the wall. Then one by one, every man in the room—even the boy pages—every man except the king—walked over and delivered three blows each.

I probably should tell you that most of them weren’t very nice about it. And, yes, I was somewhere in the line up. To be honest, I’m not used to hitting people. And if this guy had been even the slightest bit penitent, I wouldn’t have done it. But he wasn’t. So I took a swing and pounded him three times on the rib cage. It probably hurt my fist more than it hurt him, but anyway, I did it.

After the last blow was delivered, the king turned to Tana. “Do you have a message for this man?” he asked.

Tana stood up, walked over to where the messenger from Goraudok lay on the floor. She stood over him for a long moment.

Then she spit in his face.

Message delivered.

About that time an older woman was admitted to the court. She reminded me of my grandma; she had that same look of

kindness in her eyes. I heard someone call her Lady Paula, so I assume this was the woman the king had summoned. She took Tana in her arms, and, after being dismissed by the king, the two of them walked out together.

Then the king strode over and spoke to the battered messenger. “Tomorrow,” he said, “when we take you out of chains and put you on your horse, this is the message you will take back to Shad-on. Five days from today, he is to report to the watchtower at the Hill of Beneger. He is to bring my daughter, alive and unharmed. He is also to bring my daughter’s servant, Dove Fogico. She too is to be alive and unharmed. The two of them will be delivered to me. I will arrive fully armed with my entire bodyguard. Then and only then will I discuss the territories your master wishes to discuss. Make sure your master completely understands this: If he fails to deliver my daughter and her servant—alive and unharmed, then Arken will march on Goraudok, and we will kill every man until we find Shad-on. And you tell your master that I will not stop until my horse doctor makes him a gelding, his wrists are chained to the wall of our common prison, and his body is used for the sport of men most depraved.”

“Now,” said the king turning to his men, “put this man in chains and guard him until the gates open in the morning. Then escort him to the Goraudok border.”

Wow.

Am I missing something? Or did we just declare war?

Chapter 14

Apparently we did.

The moment the messenger was hauled out of the court, the king pointed to Cedric and me and said, "Follow me."

As we walked through corridors, the king did the talking. "You two will ride within the hour. Your skills as an archer may be needed, Straight Arrow. I am sending you deep into Goraudok territory. There you will find the princess and Dove, you will get them out of prison and smuggle them back to Arken. It's imperative that you reach them before the messenger gets back to Shad-on."

Wonderful news! Dove is getting rescued! And the princess, of course

Terrible news! They think I'm some kind of Navy Seal or CIA spy. I needed to put a stop to this. The time had come to tell the king the terrible truth.

"Your Honor," I said to the king. "I'm honored to help in any way I can, but I'm not any good with a bow and arrow." I thought about adding that I'm reasonably good with a toilet swab, but I figured that was too much information.

The king laid his hand on my shoulder and looked at me with that fatherly expression on his face. "Never doubt your abilities on the eve of a mission, Straight Arrow," he said. "You have been tested in battle. Your heroism will be remembered in leg-

end and song. When the moment comes, I have no doubt that you will show yourself to be the man that you are.”

That’s what I was afraid of.

I stepped back and bowed to the king. It’s a waste of time to try to argue with these kind of people.

The king led us to a room near the king’s quarters. The door opened, and there inside sat none other than Threadbar.

I almost fell over.

“Threadbar!” I was stunned.

“Straight Arrow,” he said. Somehow his voice was different. He sounded so much more—I don’t know—confident, in charge.

“But how did you get out of prison?” I asked.

The king broke in. “The man you know as Threadbar is one of the Arken’s most trusted agents. For the last three years he has uncovered the identity of sixteen Goraudok agents embedded here in Arken. He did it all from the Tower of Arken where the man you knew as the warden was, in actuality, a Goraudok spy. You’ll be happy to know that the warden is now in chains.”

Yeah. In more ways than one. Nothing personal, but I just don’t like it when people threaten to cut off my feet.

I looked around the room. Tana was there, going over some sort of map with a man I didn’t know.

We were quickly introduced. His name was Arnold, but everybody called him Contact, so I just started calling him that as well. His role was to get us smuggled into Goraudok city of Ashok where the women were being held. Unfortunately, it was also the home of Shad-on, lots and lots of assassins who

liked poking people with poisoned arrows, and many nasty soldiers.

For you *Lord of the Rings* people, it was about the same as walking into Mordor.

Tana was amazing. She could remember everything—where the guards stood, what kind of weapons they carried, where the keys were, how many doors you went through, even how many steps there were going down to the dungeon.

The problem was we had to remember it because we couldn't afford to be caught in Goraudok with a diagram of the prison. It would lead to unpleasant questions. Threadbar and Contact had great memories, but nowhere near as good as Tana. Too bad she couldn't come along as a guide.

The plan was clear. We needed to ride, and ride hard, for the southern border, cross the Waladraw Mountains, and find our way deep into the heart of Goraudok, enter the capital city of Ashok, find a way into the prison, set Dove and Gabriella free, and get ourselves out of there without being noticed, captured or killed.

Okay. ... When we finish that we'll swim the English Channel escorted by a school of Great White Sharks. Just to make it interesting, I'll cut myself first. Did I tell you that I don't know how to swim?

I thought I would ask a question. "Do we have any armored vehicles?" Personally, I would prefer entering Goraudok in a Marauder with a .50 caliber machine gun mounted on top in an armored turret. Have you seen those Marauders? I mean if I had five hundred thousand dollars to spend on a car, that would be my car of choice. There's something nice about knowing you can drive over an exploding IED with one of those and the only damage is to the ground beneath your vehicle.

“V hackles, Straight Arrow? What are these armored V hackles?” Cedric was talking. “Is this some wizardry from Prairie of the Sun?”

Strike one. I asked a few more background questions, but it did no good. The Kingdom of Arken was fresh out of Marauders, Apache helicopters, night vision goggles, Navy Seals, or anything else truly useful in carrying out this raid. Instead we had an archer—yours truly—and I’m sure that raises your confidence level.

In far too little time, the briefing was over. We all dressed in armor, but they didn’t have Kevlar so I had to make do with chainmail. And we got told multiple times that our armor needed to stay hidden under our other clothes. I guess prancing around Goraudok wearing Arken chainmail is likely to raise some eyebrows.

The king spoke some kind of blessing over us, and we headed to the stables where someone else had already provisioned horses for the four day round trip.

Horses.

Here we come to a bit of a problem.

I pulled Cedric aside. “Cedric,” I whispered, “I don’t know how to ride a horse.”

He looked at me like I had said I had never heard of the Internet or didn’t know how to operate a cell phone. “Surely you jest, Straight Arrow,” Cedric said in his usual loud voice. “For you and Dove were on horseback when you encountered the Goraudok assassins three days before we met.”

Oh, yes. My cover story. It was unraveling. This is why I’d never make it in the CIA—I don’t know how to lie.

“Yes, that is true,” I lied, “but I need to explain.” At that point I started coughing to give my mind some time to work out an explanation. “It is true that I was on horseback, but you need to understand that Dove is the real equestrian.” (I threw that word in there to reassure them that I wasn’t a complete dummy when it came to these animals.) “She rode her horse, and mine just followed. All I did was climb on and hang on. My horse was trained to follow hers. That’s all I know about riding horses.” Then I added, “Most people in Sun Prairie don’t ride horses at all.” At least that part was true.

Now all three of them were staring at me. I felt like the kid who wet his pants in elementary school.

Cedric broke the silence. “You will learn,” he said.

Apparently, I would learn quickly.

I asked Cedric for a Kindergarten level horse, but that didn’t seem to translate. (“What is a kinder garden? More wizardry from Prairie of the Sun?” *Good grief.*) The stable boy brought out my horse and handed me the lead rope. He assured me that I had nothing to worry about—my horse was bred for speed and endurance. (Thanks. I think.)

Hanging around the stable was a woman who became my instructor. She was the woman who taught the offspring of Lords and Ladies how to ride. They started at the ridiculously young age of three. The kids that is. I don’t know how old the horses were. During the next ten minutes I discovered that a halter is not a bridle and that the withers and the haunches are in two very different places. I learned how to pick the horse’s hooves clean, brush him (mine was a gelding, I was told), and tighten up the saddle.

“Your horse is calm of the right side, but a little jittery on the left. Keep that in mind.”

Say what?

She must have seen the confusion on my face. “You don’t know what I’m talking about do you?”

I shook my head.

My instructor launched into a detailed lecture on horses as prey animals with eyes on the side of their heads who need to learn the same thing on both sides. Finally, Cedric cut in and said our time was up.

I wish she would have gotten to the part that I needed to know like how to start, how to stop, and how to steer. Maybe she figured I knew that already.

My bow and arrows were fastened to the horse, along with a bedroll, food, water and camping supplies. Like the others, I got a small bag full of gold. I guess if we got into trouble we were to buy our way out.

We mounted our horses, and it was time to go. Threadbar went first, followed by Contact. Then it was my turn.

“Giddy up,” I said. I’m not a big fan of Westerns, but based on what I had seen, I thought this was the correct terminology.

My horse was busy munching grass. What was my horse’s name, again? There was so much to remember. Copper or Cinnamon or Jaundice or something like that. I tried to remember. Perhaps if I invoked the horse’s name, I would get a better response. Based on the horse’s behavior a name related to eating might be more appropriate. Glutton or Muncher, maybe.

“Giddy up, Muncher,” I said, slightly louder than the first time.

No response.

“WHACK!” I’m not sure if I heard the slap or felt the jolt first, but we were in motion, and the sound of Cedric’s laughter

trailed behind me. I grabbed onto the saddle horn (even though I had been told not to), and squeezed with my legs (again, told not to) to hang on. We were gaining on the other horses.

“The horse suits you well,” Cedric shouted.

I didn’t dare turn around, but I’m pretty sure if I did I would see the outline of Cedric’s hand imprinted on the rear end of my horse.

Pardon me.

The haunches.

Chapter 15

When you get thrown into the deep end of the pool you either swim or you drown. At least that's the theory. I don't know. Having never been thrown into the deep end of the pool, and not knowing how to swim, I couldn't say. But who knows, maybe that's next on the list here in Arken.

The point is I got thrown into the deep end of horsedom, and somehow managed to stay on the animal. Horses are herd animals, or so I've been told. So I expect that's why Muncher hung more or less with the other horses despite my attempts to lead him where I wanted him to go by tugging on the reins or jabbing my heels into his side.

After some time, we settled into an uneasy working arrangement. I sat. He steered. He stopped. He started. When we all stopped, I climbed down and limped around suspecting that I was developing blisters in sensitive places, but I found him an apple anyway, held it out with a straight hand so my fingers wouldn't be mistaken for animal treats, and got rewarded with horse slobber.

Mental note: If I ever come back to Arken, I'm bringing a gallon jug of Germ-X.

After a while, we fell into a pattern. We rode for three hours, stopped for an hour. When we stopped, one person kept watch while the two others slept. It was truly amazing. These men could sleep on command. I had an uncle like that. We'd be talking one minute, and the next minute he'd be sleeping. I had

another uncle who sounded like a chainsaw when he slept. I know you think I'm kidding, but the first time I heard him sleep I honestly went outside to see who was cutting down trees. He died. Murdered in his sleep. It's a long story.

All this napping didn't make much sense to me until I discovered the reason: We were riding all night.

Oh.

In the middle of the night, Contact discussed our cover story. We all had names. He rattled them off, but sleep deprivation kept them from registering in my mind. He said something about us being farmers taking produce into the capital city of Ashok.

We did the Waladraw Mountains at night. Contact knew some route through the mountains that nobody else knew about, or if they knew about it, they didn't take it. Didn't take me long to figure out why. Nobody in their right mind would take a horse on a three-foot wide trail with a thousand foot drop off under the best conditions, but certainly not when it was cold, dark and rainy.

Muncher plodded on. Probably a good thing that I didn't know how to steer the horse because I couldn't see where we were going. I just prayed that if we went over the side, I would land on the horse instead of the horse landing on me. Since I was shivering like crazy, I wrapped my wool blanket around me, held on and prayed for morning sun.

As the night wore on, I picked up snippets of conversation from the others. I found out that Contact and Threadbar were carrying fast acting poison. If they were captured and identified as agents of Arken, they were to activate their speedy demise. Sort of like what U2 pilot Gary Powers was supposed to do when he was shot down over the Soviet Union in 1960. I guess Contact and Threadbar know too much. Cedric and I, on the

other hand, could be tortured all day, reveal everything we knew about everything, and still not do that much damage to Arken.

What a pleasant thought.

Cedric and I were repeatedly told not to fight our way out of anything except as a last resort. This was a stealth mission, and our weapons were to be disguise and deception. That meant I would need to lie. And we all know what a good liar I am.

Of course, if I was tortured, maybe my best defense would be to tell the whole truth including but not limited to cruise missiles, Einstein, Interstate Highways, the United Nations, GPS and the transatlantic cable. They would probably figure I was a lunatic and leave me alone.

Then again, they might drill holes in my head to drain out the evil spirits. I read that somewhere. What to look forward to if you were mentally ill in the Middle Ages.

Yuck.

I attempted to ask a few questions about what to do in various scenarios, but the response was always the same: "Straight Arrow, if that happened it would be best if you did not speak at all."

Kinda reminds me of the end of the movie, *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*.

We were con men for our country. Well, for Arken anyway.

As dawn approached, we descended into a valley. Contact informed us that we were inside the nation of Goraudok and, as such, spies that could be arrested and executed at any moment.

We crossed a couple of fields, forded a small stream, and started to make out the outline of a few farm buildings when all of a sudden we were surrounded by farm dogs. I know all

you dog lovers out there would like nothing more than to be surrounded by howling, barking, whining, growling hounds before you've had your morning coffee, but I have to say I found it both annoying and unnerving. This was supposed to be a clandestine operation, and we were becoming the star attraction in the entire valley. Besides, I'm no big fan of dogs. They have teeth, and, unless you're Cesar Millan, you never know when they might use them. Muncher seemed to share my opinion of dogs, because one of them came too close for comfort and got a faceful of horse hoof.

Good horsey.

Contact seemed happy to see the dogs, however. He dismounted, and was down on the ground rolling around with them like he was a dog himself. "Scout!" "Snipper!" "Redbags!" He was greeting them like they were long lost relatives. The other men were dismounting as well, and they looked at me like *What are you doing on the horse?*

Great!

I climbed down, and was immediately surrounded by the yapping creatures who all seemed to want to jump up on me at the same time. "Down, boy!" I said, but they weren't convinced.

A lantern appeared, and a man behind it. He walked across the field toward us, and Contact walked forward to greet him.

"Good morning, Mr. Hastings!" Contact rang out a greeting I thought the whole valley could hear. "I hope we haven't disturbed your slumber."

"Now then, Mr. Narbone. Visiting with friends, are we?" The farmer held up his lantern and looked our way.

"Since it was such a lovely day," Contact said.

I guess this is how it's done. Farmer Hastings didn't ask our names, and Contact (or "Mr. Narbone") didn't offer them. Our horses were brought into one of the barns. We were given breakfast. Mrs. Hastings spoke not a word to us as she put the food on the table. Instead she ranted on to her husband about a cousin who had married a rancher—an arrangement that met with her disapproval. When breakfast was over, we were equipped with two hay wagons each pulled by two fresh horses. All of this was accompanied by gold changing hands and a lot of make believe haggling on the part of Contact.

As you might imagine, Cedric was more than a little hesitant to leave Manford, his horse, with someone he had just met. But Contact reassured him that Manford couldn't be safer anywhere in Goraudok.

Scant reassurance.

Contact and Cedric took the first hay wagon; Threadbar and I got the second one. Our weapons were wrapped in cloths and placed under the hay, but within reach if we needed them. I made it clear to Threadbar that he should drive. "Give me a Buick or a Chevy any day of the week," I told him. "anything from a Suburban to a Chevette, stick or automatic, backwards forwards, day or night, summer or winter. But this thing—you better drive it."

I think Threadbar is starting to get used to me, because he just nodded and took the reins. I could almost read his mind: more silliness from Prairie of the Sun.

Once we were underway, and the ubiquitous canines had returned to the Hastings farm, I tried to strike up a conversation with Threadbar. "So, how does it feel to be out?"

"Fine," he said.

"I bet your daughter was happy to see you. And your wife."

Threadbar grunted.

“How old did you say your daughter was again?” “Do you think you’ll do any janitorial work in the future?” “Is everything squared away between you and that nobleman? Is the debt all paid?” “Did the king help with that.”

I’ve been learning from Dove. Talk to them about what they’re interested in. Not everybody wants to talk about Indian arrowheads or the Tomb of the Unknown Indian. People have other interests.

Finally Threadbar turned to me. “Sir Arrow,” he said, “it is prudent not to speak. We never know who might be listening. And the less you know about me, the safer you are.”

Oh.

Okay. I shut my yapper, and took in the scenery. It sure would be nice to have Pandora or Spotify or iTunes or even an old cassette player. Shoot, I’d even be willing to listen to my Uncle Lars yodel and watch polka with my grandmother. That’s how desperate I was.

I looked forward into the other hay wagon as it rounded the bend in front of us. It was comical, to be honest, to look at Cedric. He looked like a plump little merchant. Nobody would ever guess that he was Hercules without the toga, Samson without the hair.

Then I leaned back against the hay and fell fast asleep. I think I dreamed that I was on a road construction crew and my hands got stuck to a jackhammer that wouldn’t turn off.

Scary.

By mid-afternoon we were halfway from the farm to Ashok, according to Contact. Apparently, he had been here before. More than once. As I say, our weapons were hidden under hay.

Our armor, as I mentioned, was hidden under our clothes. If we were stopped, Contact and Threadbar were to do the talking. They were trained for this sort of thing.

But if talking failed? Then we fight. With or without weapons, Cedric was a walking tornado. Contact and Threadbar were agents for the king. I'm not sure what that means, but my guess is that they know how to kill people. And then there's me.

Straight Arrow. Protector of Arken. Defender of the King. I tried to imagine myself in that role, but all I could come up with was Steve Martin playing Inspector Clouseau in the *Pink Panther* when he and Ponton took on the thugs who stepped out of the elevator.

You may be wondering if I was scared. Short answer: yes. The four of us were stealing the most valuable hostages held by an entire nation, and I didn't even know how we were going to do it.

I leaned over and whispered into my traveling companion's ear, "Hey, Threadbar, what's the plan."

Threadbar shook his head. "It's best if you don't know until we get there."

Okay.

When traffic passed us going the other way, Contact and Threadbar waved lazily. So Cedric and I did the same.

About three hours after nightfall, we reached the city gate. We had to go through a large village to get there. And even though there were soldiers everywhere, nobody paid much attention to us until we got to the gate.

A small soldier stepped out in front of the first hay wagon. He was wearing armor. He had a sword strapped to his side. And Cedric could swat him like a fly. Unfortunately, he was sur-

rounded by about thirty other soldiers armed with crossbows, swords, war hammers, axes, and other devices with which to inflict unpleasantries upon people like us. Even though there were torches everywhere, there were also plenty of dark corners where people with poison-arrow crossbows could be lurking, just waiting for us to say or do the wrong thing.

“State your business,” the little man said.

“A greeting to you, Master of the Gate,” Contact called out. “Hay for the stables. Two loads.”

The small man said nothing. Instead he walked slowly around the two wagons and stopped when he came to me.

“You!” he said looking me straight in the eye.

I couldn’t help it. I looked both ways, hoping he really meant someone else. But he didn’t.

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“Climb down,” he ordered.

Who me?

I climbed down.

“What’s your name, farmer?” he asked me.

Name. We went over that. I had a name. The other three had names. Only one problem—I couldn’t remember what they were. *I need to come up with a name. I hope they don’t ask me their names.* So I said the first thing that came to my mind. “Doug Johnson.”

So far I was telling the truth. Sort of. I didn’t tell him that a federal judge in Madison, Wisconsin changed it from Doug Johnson to Straight Arrow and that Dove Fogico, whom they were holding as a hostage, calls me Crazy Horse.

“And what village are you from, Doug, Son of John?”

They say the truth is easier to remember than lies.

“Sun Prairie.”

“Prairie of the Sun. I have no knowledge of this village. Why, Doug, Son of John, would I have no knowledge of your village?”

I don't know. Perhaps because it's on a different planet? What do you say to people like this?

“It is quite distant, sir.” Again, as far as I knew, that was the truth.

“Yet you take the north road into Ashok. There are no distant villages along the north road. Unless, of course, you come from Arken.”

Hmm. There's gotta be a good response to that.

“Arken?” I tried to act confused. I looked up at Threadbar. Inscrutable. Unreadable. I looked over at Contact. He looked relaxed and happy. I looked at Cedric. He looked like he was praying.

“Oh, Arken!” I said. “That’s a completely different country, isn’t it? I’m not from Arken. I’m from Sun Prairie.”

I smiled. *I'm getting good at this. I should spy more often.*

The gatekeeper looked at me for a long time before smiling back. “Tell me, Doug, Son of John, from Prairie of the Sun, why does it take four men to deliver two loads of hay to Ashok?”

Beats me. Is that unusual? “I don’t know,” I said. “They asked me to come along, and I said yes.”

“Our friend wanted to see the great city of Ashok,” Contact spoke up.

Mr. Power Trip didn’t like that. He gave Contact the evil eye and said, “You will speak only when you are addressed.” Then he turned to me, held up a hand, and two soldiers ran over with pitchforks in their hands. Then he asked me, “What will my men find when they examine your load?”

Great question. “I don’t know,” I said. “Hay, I think.”

He snapped his fingers. The soldiers climbed up into the hay and began jabbing it savagely. After two or three minutes of this, he snapped his fingers again. The soldiers stopped and climbed down.

All this time the little man kept his eyes locked on mine. Finally he said to me, “I don’t like you, Doug, Son of John. I don’t trust you. You will report here tomorrow at noon, and I will question you further. If you fail to report, I will send for you, I will find you, and I will make you suffer. Do you understand?”

I nodded.

Well, it wasn’t exactly friendship, but he wanted to get together again. That seemed like a good sign.

“Take your hay to the stables,” he said. Then he finally broke eye contact and walked away.

I climbed back up, and we were under way. We were in Ashok. So far, so good.

Somewhere, within a mile of where I sat, was Dove Fogico from South Street, Sun Prairie, Wisconsin. All I had to do was find her, rescue her, bring her and the princess back to Arken, and figure out a way to get back to Sun Prairie.

We took the hay to a stable somewhere. There we retrieved our weapons—still wrapped in cloth, and left our wagons, the hay

and the horses in the care of a stable hand. Then the four of us set out into the night. Contact acted like he was out for an evening stroll. He seemed completely relaxed. Following him, we turned down one street, headed across another, ducked down an alley, followed a winding path between several buildings, and finally ended at a thick wooden door. Contact produced a key, unlocked the door, and we walked in and locked the door behind us. There were hot coals in the fireplace. Contact and Threadbar stoked the fire and lit several lanterns. Heavy wooden beams crossed the low ceiling. There was a rough wooden table and heavy wooden chairs. Oak maybe. I don't know. Shutters covered the windows on the outside. And Threadbar closed a second set of shutters on the inside. Contact picked up a stack of papers or parchments from a shelf. Then we sat at the table.

Contact was the first to speak. "We are safe to speak here," he said in a hushed voice, "provided we talk quietly."

Threadbar turned to me. "Except for forgetting your name and telling them you were from Prairie of the Sun, you handled yourself well, Sir Arrow."

"Thank you." *I think.*

"It couldn't be helped," Contact said. "Our archer is trained as a soldier, not a spy."

Oh. I guess that wasn't a compliment.

"However," Contact continued, "it worked out fine. Now to discuss our plans. We will be changing into the uniforms of Goraudok Guardians—their security forces, bodyguards for Shad-on, dark police of their kingdom."

Nazi Gestapo. KGB. Secret Police. Imperial Stormtroopers. I get it.

Contact was still talking. "We have orders, signed by Shad-on himself," he held up the paper, "—a beautiful forgery. We are

to remove the prisoners for interrogation. We will take custody of the princess and of Lady Fogico. Once we get them over the city wall, we will be met by a carriage. There we change clothes and travel back to the Hastings farm, where we retrieve our horses and return to Arken.”

Everything had been arranged. Wow. Somebody had done their homework ahead of time.

Contact and Threadbar, no surprise, wore uniforms giving them senior rank. I don't completely understand the Goraudok ranking system, but from what they told me, Contact was, I think the equivalent of a Colonel, Threadbar a Major, Cedric a Sergeant, and me a Corporal.

The nice thing was this: We could carry weapons. On the downside, we couldn't carry our own Arken weapons. Instead we each carried a Goraudok sword at our side, and Cedric and I had a crossbow and some arrows slung over our shoulders. Not sure if the arrows were poisoned. I asked, but Contact didn't know.

We stashed our own weapons in the cottage safe house, and, before we left, Contact handed me two dark gray cloth bundles to carry along with a length of rope.

“What's this?” I asked.

“For the princess and Lady Fogico,” he said.

Okay. I guess.

Before we left, Contact said it again, “Don't speak unless you need to. Let Threadbar and me do the talking.”

Following Contact's lead, we walked right down the middle of the street. The moment people got close enough to see our uniforms, they stepped out of the way to the side of the road. We arrived at the prison in about ten or twelve minutes. The

guards at the prison gate took one look at us and opened the gate for us. They didn't even ask for any papers. Once inside, Tana's description jumped to life for me. A long hallway with two guards bearing swords at the end. Two flights of stairs leading down, each flight twenty-two steps, with a guard on each landing.

We reached the lowest level where the cell block captain asked how he could help us. Contact handed him the forged orders, yawned, and rolled his eyes while the cell block captain read the instructions.

"I don't understand," the captain said to Contact. "Our facilities are perfectly sound for interrogation. Why do the prisoners need to be moved?"

Threadbar spoke up. "What rank are you?"

"Captain," came the reply.

"If you want to remain a Captain," Threadbar said, "I advise you not to question orders from Shad-on himself."

The acting was marvelous. I bit my tongue to keep from smiling. Threadbar's voice and manner left no question about who was in charge.

"Yes, sir," the Captain responded. "I will take you to the prisoners."

"No," Contact responded. "Give us the keys. We will take ourselves to the prisoners."

The Captain was speechless. "But how do you know where they are?" he asked.

Contact laughed. "I know where you live and what you ate for breakfast today. Why shouldn't I know where your prisoners are?"

Was I mistaken? Were the Captain's hands shaking when he handed Contact the keys?

"Sir," the Captain said.

"Yes."

"Beware of the witch. She put a spell on one of our guards. She has powers if you touch her."

Contact rolled his eyes again. Then he turned and handed Threadbar the keys.

Once again, everything was exactly as Tana described. The smell was awful. The torches gave barely enough light to see. But we entered the main hallway door, took 17 steps, opened the passage on the left, went down five steps, turned right, opened the second door and found the two cells.

Contact entered first. His words were loud, "The prisoners are not to speak. You are being transported for interrogation."

Confusion, shock, wonder—a whole range of emotions passed across Princess Gabriella's face as Cedric came into view wearing a Goraudok Guardian uniform. "Be still, Your Highness," he whispered. "Your life depends on you going along with this."

Threadbar and I turned to the cell holding Dove. He opened the outer door and then the inner door. There she was. Dove. The love of my life.

Threadbar spoke up as the same kaleidoscope of emotion passed over her face. "The prisoners are not to speak. You are being transported for interrogation."

But I leaned forward and whispered, "We're here to rescue you."

Dove smiled weakly.

I don't know why, but I had forgotten about The Voice. As I helped Dove to her feet, The Voice returned. "No matter what happens, son, don't give up faith. Your faith will be rewarded."

Hmm.

The bundles. Gray hooded robes for both women. And we had to tie their hands. Dove and the princess both begged Contact not to put bags over their heads, but he shook his head. "It must be done," he said.

I looked down. There in Dove's cell was the suitcase bomb from Sun Prairie. *How did she manage to bring it in here?* I don't know what came over me, but I felt compelled to pick it up and take it with us. You never know when a bomb might come in handy. Especially when you're surrounded by a hundred thousand people who hate you.

We walked right out. Contact in the lead. Then Cedric holding the arm of the princess. Then me guiding Dove. Then Threadbar, locking the doors behind us. In less than five minutes, we were back on the street. It was past midnight. The streets were deserted. Even so, Contact took several twists and turns to get us back to the safe house. I'm no spy, but even I could figure out he wanted to make sure we weren't being followed.

In the dark streets, the logic of the dark gray robes became clear. The women were extremely difficult to see, even at a distance of a foot away. The robes made them blend in with the darkness.

In the safe house, the blindfold bags and the bindings came off. The women looked exhausted, and they seemed subdued. I wonder if they were in shock. Dove was shaking just like I was after the accident. I think the princess was too. The princess was just staring into space, and Dove kept saying, "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry."

We didn't really have time to do much to comfort them, other than offer them some food and water. Contact did the talking, as he passed out more gray robes for each of us to put on over our uniforms. "We can't stay in Ashok. Tomorrow morning every soldier in Goraudok will be looking for you. We can't go through any of the gates. Too dangerous. We need to climb down the wall. Once we clear the city, I can get us back to Arken."

We abandoned our Goraudok weapons, gathered our Arken weapons, I picked up the bomb, and we left.

Contact led us to the perimeter of the city, where the buildings were built into the wall. High above, we heard the click, click, click footsteps of soldiers marching out their guard duty on top. Contact motioned for us to stop. We listened to night sounds, and I heard the sound of those footsteps swell and diminish as the guard made his circuit.

Contact opened a door, and we climbed a set of steps, then another. We walked through a dark room, turned a corner, and there was an open window with cool outside air coming in.

I looked out. Twenty feet down, at least. Maybe more. I don't know about you, but I'm not a big fan of heights. Not any more. When I was a kid I loved heights. Used to climb trees all the time. Climbed on top of the Elementary School roof when I lived in North Carolina. (Don't tell anybody—I know I would get in trouble.) But one time I fell out of one of those trees and landed on my elbow. Don't ask me how. I was in a cast for six weeks, and sometimes my elbow still hurts when I think about it.

"So ..." I said, "this is the only way out?"

"Don't worry," Cedric said. "We have a rope."

Ah. Very comforting.

Threadbar went down first. Cedric tied a loop in the rope and wrapped it around the princess. When Threadbar signaled that we were in the clear, Cedric lowered the princess to the ground. Then he went down. Contact and I lowered Dove. Then it was my turn.

You know that feeling you get when you're at the top of the water slide and you don't want to go down, but all these young ladies in bikinis are staring at you wondering why you're not going?

Okay, maybe that doesn't happen to you.

Anyway, I went. Over the edge. Dangling on the rope. Lowering myself down, hand over sweaty hand until my rubbery legs touched the ground.

Finally Contact. We couldn't leave the rope hanging down the wall, so he doubled it and rappelled down, even though the rope wasn't quite long enough and he needed to jump the last six feet. But he seemed cool and calm about it. All in a day's work, I guess. Plus he managed to keep the rope, so we didn't leave evidence of our departure behind for the alarmed citizenry of Ashok to discover in the morning.

Yes, there were soldiers patrolling the wall overhead. But no, they didn't hear us or see us. If they did, they didn't seem interested. We slowly walked away. Contact warned us about patrols circling the city after dark, but we didn't run into any. About a mile from the city, we started to pick up our pace. We jogged the best we could for another mile though we had to stop every couple hundred yards for the two women, and, okay I admit it, for me.

After a few more minutes, we climbed a small knoll and looked down into a ravine below. There was a covered carriage complete with six horses and a driver. Contact went forward, paid

the man gold, and we all piled in. Immediately, we started moving.

We did it!

We rescued Dove. We rescued Princess Gabriella. We escaped from Ashok. We hired a carriage. We're on our way to Arken. All is well.

“We’re not out of the woods yet,” Contact said. “There may be checkpoints. If we are stopped, there are hidden compartments under both of these seats. I’m afraid I will need to ask you ladies to climb into them, and we’ll throw these robes over you. We can’t risk letting anyone see you.”

“There weren’t any checkpoints on the way in,” I said.

“That’s right,” Contact replied. “But about eight o’clock tomorrow morning, the whole country will go into lockdown. They use mirrors, flags and fires to signal from great distances. Travel will be restricted. Pray we reach the farm before we get stopped.”

The princess started sobbing. Cedric put his arm around her, and she buried her face in his chest and wept.

All of us guys looked at each other. What do you do? When women cry, what are you supposed to do? They don’t teach this stuff in school, and I never had any sisters so I’m clueless.

Sorry.

Dove leaned forward and looked me in the eye. “Straight Arrow,” she said. “You can’t let them take us back. You can’t. Do whatever you need to do, but you can’t let them take us back.”

She called me Straight Arrow. She never calls me Straight Arrow.

I nodded. Whatever it took, even if I needed to die, Dove and Gabriella would not go back to that prison. *I promise.*

Chapter 16

When I took Dove's hand at the prison, The Voice had spoken to me. "No matter what happens, son, don't give up faith. Your faith will be rewarded."

What exactly did that mean? I wanted to reach over and tap her on the shoulder to see if The Voice would give us some kind of explanation, but it didn't seem like the right thing to do.

Princess Gabriella had drifted off to sleep, leaning against Cedric. Dove was sitting next to her, and Contact, Threadbar and I sat facing them. The light in the carriage was minimal, but I could make out everyone's face.

Dove was speaking. "So, tell me the story. How did you do this?"

Contact answered. "The king suspected Goraudok from the very beginning. But he wasn't able to confirm that you were prisoners in Ashok until a week ago. He knew Shad-on would never release you voluntarily, so we've been planning this rescue operation ever since. We just needed to send Tana in to find out exactly where you were."

"You talked to Tana?" Dove asked.

I nodded.

"She told you?"

I nodded.

Dove's voice broke. "She was brave."

Threadbar spoke for all of us. “Yes, she was.”

Cedric added, “Shad-on will not go unpunished. The king will see to that.”

I wanted to tell Dove that we beat the crap out of the messenger, but somehow it just didn’t seem like the right thing to say at that moment.

Instead I asked the question I was afraid to ask, but I asked it anyway. “Did they hurt you?”

“No,” Dove said. “They were afraid to touch me. The Voice protected me.”

I looked at Dove. *Thank God.* Then I looked at the bomb, still in its case, on her lap.

“And your case?” I asked. “How did it stay with you?”

“I was carrying it when we were kidnapped.”

“Okay,” I said, “tell us the story. We woke up and you were missing. What happened?”

“It was the woman they call Kateryn,” Dove said.

No surprise.

“Is Humphrey okay? Did they find him?” Dove asked.

“Humphrey is fine. The king is also fine. Kateryn is in prison.” I told her.

“Wow. Did they find out?”

“You mean that Kateryn was trying to murder the king? Yeah, they found out. I was there.”

Dove shook her head. “Okay. I didn’t know anything at all about that. We just didn’t know if Kateryn set us up, or if it was just a big mistake. I am so sorry. I don’t know why I

trusted her. It was my poor judgment that caused this whole mess.”

Contact broke in. “I think we need to hear your side of the story. What happened? How did you disappear from the camp?”

Dove said. “It was Kateryn. She was desperate. Humphrey was missing. If his parents or the king found out, she would lose her job and go to jail—maybe worse. She believed he was just outside the camp. He loved to go exploring. It was almost dark. If we hurried, we could find him, get him back in the camp before anyone noticed he was gone. She begged us to help her. Princess Gabriella said yes to her because she loved her cousin Humphrey. And I didn’t want this woman to go to prison because she took her eyes off a little child for less than a minute.”

My cousin came to mind. Left his two-year-old son in the back of an unlocked station wagon for a couple hours out in a parking lot. It happened like this: Wife puts child in car seat in the rear facing seat of a 1983 Oldsmobile Station Wagon. Child falls asleep. Husband gets in car and drives off to an appointment without realizing his baby is in the car. Ouch! Fortunately, no one stole the kid. He didn’t roast. It turned out okay. Now the kid grew up and handles explosives for a living.

Dove went on. “I thought it was strange that the man on watch was asleep. Really strange. But Kateryn seemed delighted that no one would notice us slipping out. Two other men were also on watch in that area, but they were deep in conversation with each other. I don’t think they ever saw us.”

Kateryn probably drugged the guy on watch and bribed the other two. My thoughts, for what they’re worth.

“After we got past the watch and out of earshot, we got to the place where Kateryn thought Humphrey would be. We started

calling for him. Kateryn went one way. Gabriella and I went the other. I was starting to get concerned because it was starting to get dark, we were outside the camp without a guard, and the princess was unprotected. That's when they appeared. Goraudok assassins. Dressed in black. All around us. Before we could scream, they had hands over our mouths. Again, I am so sorry."

Wow.

"I was carrying the bag because ..." Dove looked around at the other people in the carriage, "well, it didn't seem prudent to leave it behind."

"What's in the bag?" Threadbar asked.

Dove shrugged. "Just some things I brought from home."

She went on with her story. "Within a minute there were a couple guys on horseback. They gagged us, tied our hands and put us on horses with them. But when the horseback rider touched me, The Voice spoke to him. That time we could all hear what the voice was saying. 'You will be cursed if the bag doesn't stay with the woman.' He tried to laugh it off, but the moment he started riding away, he started screaming that he wasn't able to see. He went blind. He managed to turn the horse around. Someone handed him the bag, and his sight was restored. From that point on, no one wanted to touch me, and everyone was very careful to make sure the bag stayed with me."

"For some reason the bag is important," I said.

"I guess it is."

The carriage we were in jostled along. I don't know much about horses, but I could hear the hoofbeats outside, and they sounded like thunder to me. I think we were in the Goraudok version of a Lamborghini or a Bugatti Veyron.

“The horses were extremely fast,” Dove said. “We rode all night. Gabriella said we took a very indirect route across deserted stretches of land and forest. Three days later we were in Ashok. They threw us in the prison you saw. They’ve barely fed us. We sometimes go two days without water. And you know what happened to the princess. And I’m claustrophobic. We can’t go back.”

We sat in silence for a while. Then Dove asked, “How did Kateryn try to murder the king?”

I told her the story, and then Cedric threw in the part about me stopping the knife with a chair.

Dove smiled. “Crazy Horse, what did I tell you? You’re a medical miracle!”

Wow, it was good to have Dove back.

As we bumped along the road, I dozed off. When I awoke, morning had come. Everyone was sleeping except Threadbar.

“I’m awake,” I said. “I can keep watch for a while.”

He nodded. “Wake us immediately if we stop, or if anything doesn’t feel right to you. Wake up Contact if you start feeling drowsy. If you’re even a little tired, wake up Contact. Don’t let yourself drift off.”

“Okay.” In actuality, I felt pretty good. This was the first decent sleep I had had in a while, even if it was sitting up in the back of a moving carriage in between two Arken spies.

In less than a minute, Threadbar was sleeping.

As I watched everyone sleep, I did some thinking about our situation. Dove and I were together again. Soon we should pass safely into Arken. But how do we get back to Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, USA, Planet Earth? I had no control over how I got here. Is it possible to have any control over getting back? I

went over what Dove told me about her two previous visits to Arken. In each case, she just found herself back. Involuntary.

What if we weren't supposed to go back? What if we were supposed to live the rest of our lives right here? Would Dove and I really be married here? Would we be husband and wife? Would we have children? If we had children and then went back, would our children go back with us? Would their home be Arken or Wisconsin? Would they learn to ride a horse or drive a car?

What if only one of us goes back? What if Dove goes back and leaves me here? What if I go back and Dove is left behind? What would happen to her? What would happen to us?

"Oh, God, please," I whispered. "Dove is the love of my life. I'll tell her when we get back. But please bring us safely home. Please."

Just then the carriage hit some kind of pothole and the princess jerked awake, and looked around her with haunted eyes.

"It's okay," I said softly. "It's okay."

She looked past Dove out the small window. "Are we in Arken?" she asked.

"No. Goraudok," I said. "But I think we're making good progress. We should get to the border by the end of the day, I think."

The princess was silent for a long time. Then she spoke, "I don't know what I'm going to tell my dad."

How do you answer that? "What do you mean?" I asked.

"Don't you see?" she said. "It's my fault. All of this is my fault."

"I don't know about that," I said. *How was it her fault?*

“My father told me never to go anyplace without a bodyguard. I ignored his instruction. None of this would have happened if I would have listened to him.”

“Princess Gabriella,” I said. “I think your dad is way, way, way beyond blaming you for anything. All he cares about is getting his daughter safely home. That’s all.”

Gabriella started crying. “This never would have happened if I would have listened to him.”

“Nobody’s blaming you,” I said.

“It’s all my fault.”

I read the book *Men Are From Mars, and Women Are From Venus*. And I think it’s really true. We are from different planets. We speak a different language. I wasn’t sure what else I could say without starting an argument. So I just shut up. Sometimes it’s the smartest thing to do.

After a while, everybody woke up, and then we stopped for a restroom break. The sun was high in the sky. *Close to noon*, I told myself. Then I said aloud, “I wonder if that gatekeeper is missing me?”

Threadbar shook his head.

I know. I know. Don’t talk. You never know who might hear. Who’s going to hear? We were out in the middle of nowhere, on a dusty road with a few trees all around.

We climbed back in and galloped on. Free sailing. We had to be reasonably close to the farm. Another hour of two, we’d be with Mr. Hastings. We switch horses. We climb the Waladraw Mountains. Assuming we don’t fall over any of the cliffs and die, we should be in Arken by the middle of the night. Tomorrow morning, the king will have his daughter back. Then Dove

and I can try to figure out how to get back to Sun Prairie. Nice and smooth. The way it ought to be.

That's when the carriage came to a sudden stop. Threadbar and Contact looked out the windows.

Threadbar cursed. "Bandits!" he said. Then he said to the women, "Hide." We opened each seat. Dove climbed in one, and the princess in the other. We covered them with gray robes and replaced the seat covers.

Just in time.

The door flew open, and two bandits stepped back with crossbows at the ready.

We had on our Goraudok Guardian uniforms. Time for a bluff.

Contact called out, "How dare you waylay the Guardians of Shad-on!"

Laughter was the response.

Then a voice said, "We know who you are, Arkens. Get out of the carriage."

Contact tried again, "I bear the badge of Shad-on himself."

"Get out, or we set the carriage on fire with you inside."

I reached for my bow, but the man said, "No weapons, unless you want to die."

We looked out both windows. There were about thirty of them, surrounding the carriage, most on horseback, some on foot, positioned anywhere from five to thirty yards away. All armed with crossbows, each trained on us. Our chances of escape were nil.

We stepped out. At their instruction, we walked forward about thirty feet, leaving the carriage completely unprotected.

Maybe they won't find the women. Dove and Gabriella still have a chance to escape.

We stood there with masked bandits all around.

What do they want? Money? Horses? The carriage? Our weapons? Maybe we can negotiate.

One slip, and arrows would go flying. We needed to find a way to defuse this situation. If only they would lower their crossbows. I looked at Contact, at Threadbar, at Cedric. What were they going to do? Talk, or fight?

Cedric made the decision for us. He picked up the nearest bandit and was about to throw him, when a clear voice rang out.

“I wouldn’t do that, warrior, unless you want three poisoned arrows in your neck.” That voice. I knew that voice. Who did it belong to? As he spoke, the masked bandit dismounted, and strode through the lines. He was the smallest member of the group, but he appeared to be in charge. He walked straight up to me, and removed his face mask.

I almost soiled my drawers. It was Mr. Power Trip Gatekeeper from Ashok.

“You had an appointment with me, Doug, Son of John. Or should I call you Straight Arrow, the man from Sun Prairie?”

Crap and double crap.

We had been betrayed. I looked around for the driver, but he was nowhere to be seen. *Figures.*

Then another voice, spoke up behind us, coming from the carriage. “Found them, sir,” he said.

I turned around. There was the princess in an armlock with a knife at her throat. Dove followed carrying the bomb.

She could just set the bomb right now. We'd all die, but that would be a step up from returning to Shad-on.

The man escorting her tried to put Dove in an armlock too, but he let go, fell to his knees with his hands over his ears. "Don't touch her," he cried. "She's a witch!"

Mr. Gatekeeper Bandit spoke. "Princess Gabriella of Arken, and Dove Fogico of Sun Prairie."

Good gravy! What happened to privacy. How did this guy come to know all our secrets.

Dove spoke up, "Since you know who we are," she said, "you know that you can make a great deal of money here. The king of Arken will pay dearly to get his daughter back. Every one of you could be a rich man."

Mr. Gatekeeper laughed. "And where, Lady Dove, do you propose that we enjoy our wealth? In Goraudok where we would be wanted for treason, where our wives and children would be tortured and killed for our treachery? Or in Arken, where we would be tried for kidnapping and hanged?"

Hmm. You gotta admit, he has a point.

"No," he continued. "Shad-on will pay well for the return of the princess and the witch. And we will get a nice bonus for bringing in the knight Cedric, Arnold of Marcel, Broderik of Drogo also known as Threadbar the toilet cleaner, and Straight Arrow, Protector of Arken." The sneering in his voice made me want to strangle him. But, hey, what can you do.

Nothing.

The four of us men were bound wrist to wrist. The women were put on horses with halter ropes and no reins. Then we started the long march back to Ashok.

Dove, I am so sorry.

I have to admit, I was angry with God. *What kind of universe have You put me in where I can't defend the people I love? What kind of God are You, anyway?*

I had to blink back the tears of rage and grief.

But then The Voice came back to me. *No matter what happens, son, don't give up faith. Your faith will be rewarded.*

Here's the problem with faith: What are you supposed to believe? Like I pray for people to get healed. Do they get supernaturally healed? Usually not. Sometimes they do. Why is that? Can anybody answer that question?

People tell me that I don't have enough faith. If I had more faith, more people would get healed. Maybe they're right. Then again, maybe not. Maybe some people just have a gift. They pray for people, and they get healed.

You could say the same thing about money. I pray for money. Sometimes amazing things happen. I get customers I didn't expect. One time two hundred dollars in cash showed up in my mailbox. Anonymous. No idea who sent it. But sometimes I pray for money, and I'm still late paying my bills. I work hard, but working hard isn't enough.

How many prayers for bad marriages have gone unanswered? How many parents cry out in anguish before God for a child who has chosen the wrong path? How many people all over the world beg God to deliver them from the bullies of oppression, poverty and injustice. Do those prayers get answered? Some do; most don't.

I have this conversation with God a lot: *Just tell me what You want me to do. I'll pray for that. I'm not smart enough to know what You want, so just tell me.* But He always seems to say to me in return, *What do you want, Straight Arrow? What do you want?*

I feel like there's some trick here that I haven't learned. Like when my grandfather used to give me puzzles to solve, but never told me how to solve them. God's waiting for me to figure something out, but I don't know what it is.

The Bible says that good people will live by faith. What does that mean? Does that mean we keep believing God for something even if we go to our grave without ever having received it?

Somebody tell me. What does it mean?

Chapter 17

We marched all day. On the plus side, our captors were reasonably nice to us. They gave us food and water. They gave us a break every hour or so. They even checked our bindings to make sure they weren't too tight. "Don't want your hands falling off," the guard said.

On the minus side, we were being taken back to Shad-on where we would most likely be tortured and killed. The princess might have a chance of making it out alive, but the rest of us might as well kiss this life goodbye. I'm surprised that Contact and Threadbar hadn't taken their cyanide capsules or whatever it was that they had with them to cheat the Goraudok hangman.

As we marched, I tried to figure out who these guys were. Were they bandits? Were they soldiers? Were they Goraudok assassins? Goraudok guardians? Opportunists? All of the above?

I'm not sure. In the end, I decided to just figure they were what Threadbar called them: bandits.

When we set up camp for the night, they broke out chains and locked our feet in them. Each person had his or her own set of foot cuffs. In addition, a chain ran from leg iron to leg iron to a tree where it was wound around and padlocked. It was a long enough chain to give us some freedom of movement. And we could take very tiny baby steps. But running away? Not an option.

They designated an area for us and assigned two bandits to guard us. Then somebody broke out a jug of something that smelled to me like paint thinner, but I guess it was an alcoholic beverage because pretty soon almost everybody (except us prisoners) was drunk as a skunk.

Was this an opportunity to escape?

One of our guards kept saying to us, “Don’t make so much noise.” Which was kind of strange since we weren’t even talking.

“Don’t make so much noise.” “Don make so mus noys.” “Don may so mu.” “Don ma so mu.”

Then he was down for the count.

The other guard just sat there staring at us. But after a few minutes his crossbow slid off his lap. His chin fell on his chest, and he was snoring.

Escape. Now or never. Cedric pulled on the chain to break it free from the tree. It didn’t budge. We all pulled on the chain. Nothing. Cedric tried the leg irons. He got one pair to bend a little, but he couldn’t snap them. We all tried until we collapsed, exhausted.

“What about the keys?” I asked Threadbar.

“No good,” he said. “We can’t even reach the guard, and he doesn’t have the key. The man with the key is over there.” He pointed at over two dozen bandits sitting or sprawling around a fire about thirty yards away.

Contact spoke up. “We wait for the next opportunity. There are always opportunities to escape. This just wasn’t the right one.”

I don’t think that brought good cheer to anyone.

We all sat there feeling pretty low, until the princess, who was chained closest to the tree, couldn't take it any more. She tore savagely at the chain. Her hands were soon bleeding, but she yanked at it again and again and again. Dove who was next to her reached out to put an arm around her, but Gabriella pushed her away, and continued until she collapsed, sobbing.

Cedric spoke up. "I swear by my life that I will bring you safely home to your father. You have my word of honor, my princess."

"I'm not anybody's princess," Gabriella said. "Not any more. They're taking me back to Shad-on. The princess is dead. I'm a piece of meat. I'm a human trash can. My honor has been taken from me. I'm nobody."

"No." We were all shaking our heads, and someone voiced what we were all thinking.

"It's true," Princess Gabriella said. "The best I can hope for is to become Shad-on's concubine. That's the best. And I would rather die. I have died. Princess Gabriella is dead. You might as well kill what's left of me yourselves. I deserve it. If it wasn't for me, none of you would be here."

I was about to argue with her, but Dove stepped in. "Just say it out, Gabriella. Say what's on your heart. No one will judge you here."

"But I deserve to be judged," she sobbed. "I defied the king's orders. I went into the woods without a bodyguard. I let myself get kidnapped. I let you get kidnapped. Now everyone is here because of me. It's all my fault."

"It feels to you like it's your fault," Dove said quietly.

"I should have seen it coming," the princess said. "I don't know what I did, but I must have done something. Why did

that monster do what he did to me? Why wasn't I worth protecting?"

"Let it out, Gabriella."

"It's just like my mom. It's my fault she drowned. I was the one who wanted to go on that boat ride. I begged, and I begged, and I begged until I got my own way. She didn't want to go. I killed her. I killed my mother."

Gabriella cried for a long time.

"Now I've killed all of you. Because of me, you will die. Just kill me now. I don't deserve to live. I don't want to live. The same thing is going to happen to me again. He will chain me down. In front of his whole court, he'll make me do it again. What did I do, Dove? I feel so dirty. I feel so very, very dirty."

"Yeah," Dove said softly.

"I will murder him. If it takes me the rest of my life, I will find a way. They can torture me to death if they want, but I will murder him. I promise you, I will kill him."

The princess was silent for a while. Then she continued.

"I don't want to go back," Gabriella said. "I don't want to go back. God in heaven, can You hear me? I don't want to go back. I am so scared."

There was a pause, and then Dove said, "Could I ask you a question?"

The princess nodded.

"If God Himself had something to say to you about all of this, would you be willing to listen?"

The princess nodded again.

Dove reached out and put a hand on Gabriella's shoulder. And then, once again, The Voice filled the earth. "My beautiful daughter. Do you not know that I am weeping with you? Do you not know that you are more precious to Me than the riches of all the nations? I am not sending you back to Shad-on. I am opening the door for your hands to heal the nations. My daughter, it wasn't your fault. It wasn't your fault. You made a mistake. But Shad-on sinned against heaven and against you. He is the one who is dirty. He is the one who is defiled. Not you. You are clean. I Myself am restoring your honor. You are the princess of Arken. I have called you to that role because I will empower you to bring good into many, many lives. It was not your fault that your mother died. You are not to blame. Know this, precious daughter. You have a right to be angry with Shad-on. What he did was inexcusable. But give that anger to Me. Your hands are to be hands of healing, not hands of harm. I Myself will avenge on Shad-on the wrong he has done to you. You will see it with your own eyes, but I will do it. Now, be at peace."

Wow.

I think all of us were crying because it took a long time for me to see clearly enough to realize that one of the bandits was standing right there.

It was Mr. Gatekeeper.

Great. He probably heard the whole thing. No respect for privacy. None. I was getting ready to call him all kinds of nasty names—at least in my head—when The Voice came back to me. *No matter what happens, son, don't give up faith. Your faith will be rewarded.*

Then I noticed that he had tears in his eyes.

“May I ask you a question,” he said addressing himself to Dove. His swaggering, sneering manner was gone. In its place was a quietness that surprised me.

“Okay,” Dove said.

“My wife,” he said, and then he paused for a long moment. “My wife is dying. Do you think your God would be willing to speak a word to me?”

Dove nodded.

Mr. Gatekeeper stepped in close and sat down on the dirt next to Dove. She placed a hand on his shoulder.

Once again, I heard The Voice, but this time I couldn't understand the words. Apparently, Mr. Gatekeeper understood, however, because he was nodding and weeping the whole time. After The Voice diminished, he sat there for a couple minutes. Then he knelt, made the sign of the cross, and stood up.

“You have helped me,” he said to us. “Now I will help you. Know first that I sit on Shad-on's council. I am privy to his plans. Your kingdom is in danger. Tell your king, the Hill of Beneger is a trap, but not the kind of trap he thinks it is. Yes, there will be assassins there, waiting in ambush. But Shad-on fully expects Arken soldiers to clear them out before the king arrives. Instead, Shad-on has massed his army in the west. They began marching two days ago. They will arrive at the winter castle while the king is away with his army. They will be carrying a forged surrender from the king. They will call on the keepers to open the gates, and then they will take charge of the castle. Once inside, everyone who remains will be a hostage. When the king returns with his army, Shad-on will kill a hostage on the wall every hour until the king surrenders.”

“How are we going to tell our king?” Threadbar asked.

The Gatekeeper answered, “Look around. The men you see will be sleeping for at least six hours. I drugged them myself. In a minute I will have your chains unlocked, and you will be free. When you leave, you must take all the horses. Otherwise, I will be compelled to follow you when the others awaken.”

True to his word, the Gatekeeper unlocked all of us, starting with the princess, then Dove, then each of us men. Cedric, last to go free, embraced the man with one of his great bear hugs.

“Come with us,” Cedric said. “I’m sure the king will grant you safe haven.”

Gatekeeper shook his head. “No. I will return home. I need to say goodbye to my wife. I will pay with my life for letting you escape, but that doesn’t matter any more. God spoke to me. I know now what I need to do.”

Threadbar took a more businesslike approach. “How did you know our names? When did you know?”

Gatekeeper nodded before answering. “A fair question. A complete answer would take more time than we can spare. The carriage driver was in my employment. He works for the highest bidder, and, when possible, he likes to get paid by both sides—something we overlook as long as we know we’re the highest bidder. I knew who you were when you arrived with the two hay wagons. I was waiting for you. I could have stopped you at the gate, but then I would not have had the opportunity to meet you, and find out if Lady Dove Fogico really possessed The Gift. I heard rumors, but I needed to know for myself. As for where I get my information—as I told you, I sit on Shad-on’s council. I know everything that needs to be known.”

“He knows too much, if you ask me,” Threadbar said, addressing himself to Cedric. “I think he should come with us. We need to know what he knows.”

Before Cedric had an opportunity to respond, the princess stepped between Threadbar and the Gatekeeper. “No,” she said quietly. “No. He set us free. We will respond in kind.”

Turning to the Gatekeeper, the princess said, “You are free.” She hesitated, then stepped forward and embraced him. “Thank you,” she said to him, “I will pray for you and your wife. Know that we don’t wish harm on you or any of the people of Goraudok.”

The Gatekeeper nodded. “I know,” he said. “Thank you.”

Chapter 18

Getting back to Arken was easy. Relatively speaking.

There was the problem of moving thirty bandit horses ten miles in the middle of the night, the long debate between Threadbar and Contact as to what we should do with the extra horses (kill 'em, sell 'em, tie 'em up). Cedric finally put an end to that; horse lover that he is—we took them into the woods and tied them up. There was also an argument as to whether we should bypass the Hastings farm altogether, but, again, Cedric settled that: Manford was there, and he would never desert his horse. Kind of a Navy Seal thing, I think: Never leave a man behind.

I'm still not sure if I saddled Muncher or some other horse—they all look alike to me—but I got on a horse and we rode out, hitting the mountains at dawn. We did the Waladraw Mountains in daylight, which—in my opinion—was worse than doing them at night. Narrow and slippery paths. A long way down. And I don't even like watching tightrope walkers on television. Remember that guy who walked across the Grand Canyon? I knew he made it okay, but I still couldn't watch. Sorry.

But anyway, Muncher or Muncher 2, whichever horse I was on managed to keep us alive and we came out in some valley, sore, dead tired, hungry and thirsty. There was a little Arken outpost or village. We stopped. Cedric identified himself. The whole town turned out to take care of us and our horses. We got a great meal. Hot coffee—I even drank some, I was so desper-

ate. Some kind of oatmeal with roast lamb, green onions, and something that looked like pumpkin pie. It was really good to eat something and snooze for ten minutes. I could have slept for ten hours, but Cedric reminded us that we were on a mission.

Oh, yeah.

Everything was blurry in my mind. I don't function well without sleep. I remembered something about returning the king's daughter and saving Arken, but I couldn't remember why I was involved in that.

As I rode along on the horse, I found myself dreaming. I mean I knew I was dreaming, yet I also knew I shouldn't sleep. I needed to stay awake. *Wake up*, I told myself. *You gotta wake up. The Hill of Beneger*. For some reason we needed to reach the Hill of Beneger.

But I kept dreaming. I dreamed there was a helicopter. People were shouting at me, but I couldn't figure out what they were saying. For some reason I couldn't talk. Somebody said the word "Medflight." Then I was in an emergency room. There were doctors, nurses, and police. For some reason the police were there. People were asking me questions, but none of them made any sense. I heard a hospital monitor beeping. People were talking, but I couldn't make sense of what they were saying.

You gotta wake up. Straight Arvon, wake up. I couldn't tell. Was somebody shouting those words to me? Was that Dove's voice? Was she crying? Or was I saying those words to myself?

We rode on.

I don't know what happened to jolt me out of the fog, but when we reached the Hill of Beneger, I was suddenly wide

awake. It was like someone flipped on a switch. I was 100% there.

The first thing I figured out is that the king of Arken now completely controlled the Hill. I mean there were several bodies dressed in black laid out on the ground looking like pin cushions with arrows poked in all kinds of uncomfortable places. There was even one guy with an axe buried in his chest. Goraudok assassins. All dead. And I didn't see a single Arken casualty. I'm guessing the king sent in his version of the Green Berets.

There were hugs and tears; Princess Gabriella was reunited with her father.

Cedric broke in. "Your majesty, I have urgent news. Shad-on is marching from the west. He bears a forged surrender from you. He aims to occupy the winter castle, hold everyone hostage, and kill a hostage every hour in an attempt to make you surrender."

I saw the color drain from the King's face.

"Make way," someone shouted.

As the crowd around the king parted, a horse staggered into view, sides heaving, head low, nostrils flared, covered with pungent horse sweat. A rider, similarly exhausted, slid off its side, and fell on the ground before the king.

"Miles," the king said.

"Your majesty," came back a raspy voice.

"Water!" the king commanded, and someone came forward with a canteen.

"They're coming!" The man's eyes were wide with fright.

"Who?" the king asked.

“Shad-on and his troops. Ten thousand. At least. Maybe twice that.”

I saw men flinch. I looked around. I’m not sure what ten thousand soldiers look like, but I was pretty sure we didn’t have them.

“How soon?” the king asked.

“An hour. Maybe two.”

The king nodded.

Miles continued his report: “The winter castle.” Here he paused. “The winter castle has fallen.”

“How?” the king asked.

“Goraudok. Their army. Came out of the marshlands. Ten thousand troops at least, maybe more.”

“How did they breach our defenses?” the king asked.

“I don’t understand, Your Majesty. A single rider with a truce flag approached the gate. He handed something to the gatekeeper. Ten minutes later, the gates opened and the enemy soldiers marched in. No arrows. No ladders. No catapults. No missiles. No battering ram. They just opened the gate.”

“How did you escape?”

“We were gathering firewood in the southern woods on the hill overlooking Willow Point. As soon as they opened the gate, I saw the army split. About a thousand entered the winter castle. All the rest started riding this way. Most were on horseback.”

“Was Shad-on with them?”

“I think so.”

“Is he with the group marching toward us?”

“I think so.”

“Get some rest. We’ll need you in an hour,” the king said, and then he motioned for an aide who led Miles and his horse away.

The king motioned for Cedric, Contact, Threadbar, a few other knights, and me to gather in close.

The king spoke. “Do we fight, or do we capitulate? This is the most important decision we will ever make. Your counsel?”

Contact spoke up, “If we sign a truce with them, our family and our friends at the winter castle may be spared.”

Threadbar broke in, “Spared for what? To be raped? To be turned into slaves? To be used and abused and worked to death?”

Another knight spoke up. “If the report is true, they have four times as many troops.”

“We have the high ground,” Cedric broke in.

“What does that give us?” Contact said. “The best we can hope for is a draw. But even if we win, we can’t take back the winter castle without every one of our loved ones being put to death. There’s no way to win. But if we can survive, we wait for the right moment. We can plan a coup.”

“That would be the death sentence for our king and his daughter,” Threadbar cried.

“As long as I have life, Your Majesty, I will not allow your daughter to fall back into the hands of Shad-on,” Cedric said.

The king turned to me. “Straight Arrow, what is your counsel?”

A coordinated drone strike was the only suggestion that came to my mind, but I was pretty sure that wouldn't help. However, when I opened my mouth, these words came out, "Could we consult The Voice?"

"Of course," the king said. "An excellent suggestion. Summon Lady Fogico."

Dove bowed before the king.

"Lady Fogico, I must ask if you would consent to allowing The Healing Gift to be used to guide us in a time of war."

The most beautiful woman in the world stood before the king. This is what she said: "Your majesty, you may have my hands, but I do not control The Voice. God will speak what He wants to speak."

The king nodded. He reached out and clasped each of Dove's hands in his own.

The earth shook. The Voice was speaking, but I couldn't understand the words.

But the king was smiling. He stepped back from Dove and turned to me. He looked right into my eyes as he spoke.

"We will sever the head from the snake. Shad-on will die. Archer of Arken, Protector of the King, Straight Arrow, you have been given the honor of this task."

Me?

I'm not sure how long I stood there with my mouth hanging wide open, but I finally found words. "Your Majesty, how will I do that? I don't even know what Shad-on looks like."

When I was in Junior High, I got bullied by this kid named Butch. Seriously. I tried my best to survive by becoming invisible, but that didn't work very well. Everybody said that Butch

was the toughest kid in 7th Grade. I only heard of one kid who stood up to Butch, and that guy was a black belt. Anyway, Butch always wore these pointy toed cowboy boots, and I always imagined those pointy toes ending up in a very uncomfortable spot if I crossed him. As my life went from bad to worse with Butch living in the same universe as me, I decided to appeal to the adults in my world.

I went to my guidance counselor, Mr. C.

I told him the whole story (though I left out the cowboy boots). When I finished, Mr. C. smiled. “You don’t have to worry about a thing,” he told me. “If you get into a fight with Butch, I’ll pick up this phone and call the principal and tell him that the fight wasn’t your fault.”

Yeah.

This privilege of taking on Shad-on had the same kind of feel to it, only about a thousand times worse.

Cedric was talking. “It’s no trouble picking out Shad-on. He’s about a head taller than anybody else in Goraudok. Probably weighs 350 pounds—all muscle, of course. He wears black armor. And he’s the only one who wears a cape—a blood red cape.”

In other words, he will squash me like a fly.

The king added, “His armor, of course, cannot be penetrated by arrows. A strong enough swing by a battle axe might work if anyone could get close enough to him, but that won’t happen. He’s surrounded by twenty or thirty knights all the time.”

The odds just went down to zero.

“But he does have a weakness. There is a small slit in his visor. A direct hit at exactly the right angle, if your arrows are narrow

enough ... it's a one in a million shot ... it's the kind of thing you do, Sir Arrow, Archer of Arken."

O God.

I haven't talked about my brother much, but I will tell you this: Years ago, he was diagnosed with Kaposi sarcoma. They said he had AIDS. They said he was going to die.

I drove all the way to Arkansas to see him. He seemed surprised to see me, but happy I think. I was in tears. But he said to me, "Doug, (he never did go along with my name change), Doug, I look at it this way. If it's my time to go, it's my time to go."

He stood there at the threshold of death nonplussed. Okay. If I go, I go. If I stay, I stay.

He didn't die—at least not yet. He found out the doctor made a mistake. He never had AIDS. He never had Kaposi sarcoma. But he was ready to go.

How do you get to a place like that? I mean, I know all the standard stuff about making peace with God. But how do you make peace with yourself?

If it's my time to go, it's my time to go.

I tried out the phrase in my mind. I smiled because it was my brother's voice I heard.

Maybe this is it. Maybe this is where I step off the train. Maybe this is the entrance to the Promised Land.

"Okay," I said to the king. "Okay, I'll do it."

The knights around me were cheering.

I shook my head. "No," I said. "Don't cheer for me. Pray that my arrow flies straight."

The king sank to his knees and made the sign of the cross. Immediately, his knights, the soldiers, everyone as far as I could see was on their knees. Like a dummy I stood there until I realized what was happening.

My knees hit the dirt, and these words came from my mouth. "You know that I cannot do this apart from You."

Then from somewhere, someone started singing the Anthem of Arken.

*There is a flow'r that grows
on hills of Arken land,
and in its blossoms lie
the gift that heals our land.*

A thousand voices joined in. Then the king stood to his feet, and we all stood with him.

His rich voice carried throughout the ranks of soldiers that surrounded him. "Men of Arken. The enemy has invaded our land. He comes against us and against our families with great numbers and twisted hate. He hopes to make our wives and our children his own. But we will not allow it. We will fight. Today Shad-on of Goraudok will fall. The enemy approaches from the north. Scouts, ride out. Captains, prepare your men for battle."

Chapter 19

The Hill of Benegar is about a day's ride south of the winter castle. It's a steep climb surrounded on three sides by sheer cliffs each with about a 400 foot drop. At the top of the hill is a stone watchtower. The trees along the approach and on the hill itself make for excellent ambush. Since we had already cleared out the Goraudok assassins, archers of Arken took up positions in the trees.

Soldiers drove pikes into the earth in six or seven rows along the approach, but left a causeway open in the middle. Cedric told me it was to make room for an Arken cavalry charge.

I read a book someplace on military tactics. No doubt in my mind we had the superior position. Sure, they had poison arrows, but even so they would pay dearly to take this hill. I could see us holding off an army four times our size without much trouble.

And just as we finished our preparations, that army came into view. Row upon row, rank upon rank, they filled the valley below us. Thousands of men on horseback, all armed.

They stopped two or three hundred yards from our perimeter. They stopped, and they stood there.

I waited, but there was no movement. No movement at all.

Something wasn't right. I don't know what I was expecting, but I wasn't expecting this.

Then it came into focus: *They don't need to come up this hill. But eventually, we need to leave it. All they need to do to win this battle is stand still.*

I didn't see that coming.

Remember that guidance counselor? Mr. C.? Well, he did something for me. He somehow talked me into signing up for a year long debate class my freshman year in high school. I didn't really know what I was agreeing to, but I signed up for it to get him off my back. I didn't realize that debate meant I had to get up in front of the class and give a speech trying to persuade the class that they should believe me and not the last guy who just spoke.

Imagine that. This awkward, shy junior high boy marching off to the big high school as a lowly freshman needing to stand up in front of everyone and persuade them to believe me.

It was horrible. I was horrible.

We wrote our notes on 4x6 index cards. I got up, mumbled the words on my cards and sat down hoping that no one really noticed.

Day after day, week after week, I got up in front and stumbled and mumbled.

God, help me make it through this year was my only thought.

But then a strange thing happened. I actually started to get good at it. People started listening to me. People started to want me as their debate partner. I started to win.

By the time I was a sophomore, I was debating inter-scholastically on the varsity level, not only winning debates, but also winning entire tournaments. I was helping our school take home trophies. I even went to a national tournament where my

debate partner smoked a huge cigar in our hotel room and got too sick to compete. But that's a different story.

I think you could say that debate helped to turn me from a scared little kid to a reasonably confident adult. I could get up in front of a group. I talked; they listened.

I found my new identity. I was a public speaker.

I tell you all of this so you can understand why I wanted to be the high school class speaker. At our school, the class speaker was elected by the National Honor Society. Simple process. All I needed to do was get elected. I went to the meeting with high hopes. I had the track record. I had logged the time in front of audience after audience.

Mr. Public Speaker. That was me.

Kristie Novak knew this. And, for whatever reason, she didn't like me. And she didn't want me to be the graduating class speaker. Instead, she wanted her best friend Angie Cooper to be the class speaker.

Here's what she did. She got to the meeting early and positioned herself right in the middle of the room and waited. When I walked through the door, she spoke up loud enough for everyone in the room (and a few people in the hall) to hear: "Doug Johnson, I don't like the way you speak."

I didn't see it coming. I just stood there for a moment with my mouth hanging open. But that moment was all it took. She threw me off balance. In front of everyone. She went on, "I think Angie Cooper should be class speaker. What about the rest of you? Don't you agree?"

Kristie Novak went on to have a successful career in politics. I went on to clean toilets. And Angie Cooper addressed the multitudes at our commencement ceremony.

Just like high school, nobody saw it coming.

Shad-on of Goraudok played us. He set the trap; we walked into it.

And now, our only hope was for Straight Arrow of Sun Prairie, Wisconsin to kill this thug. An entire kingdom depended on me.

Great. Just great.

Expecting me to shoot through the visor of Shad-on from this distance was something like putting a basketball hoop at the far end of a football field, blindfolding me, turning me around three times, and then handing me a basketball and expecting me to swish on the first shot.

What I really needed was an AS50 or an M21 with a scope, and lots of ammo. But I didn't have that. I had a bow and arrow that I didn't know how to shoot.

David killed Goliath. This little whisper in my mind wouldn't go away.

Yeah, I answered. But he was David. I'm just me. I'm just a guy who cleans toilets.

Moses was just a guy who watched sheep. He didn't think he could do it either. But he turned out okay.

That's the problem with arguing with God; He has an answer for everything.

I looked down at the army of Goraudok. Something was moving.

A single horse and rider came forward from the enemy lines carrying a flag of truce. He seemed to be carrying some kind of bundle.

On the Arken side, I saw a lot of swords drawn and many spears at the ready. Nevertheless, the soldiers made a path, and he rode through.

I'm not real good with faces, but this one I knew. It was the messenger from Goraudok, bruised but defiant. He stopped about twenty yards from the king, and dropped his package on the ground.

It was Tana.

She was alive.

The messenger spoke. "This is what my master, Shad-on, lord of Arken says: 'You will return your daughter to me. You will slay Dove Fogico, the witch of Arken, and bring her head to me. Your men will lay down their arms. And you will report to the common prison. As a courtesy, we are delivering to you this woman, Tana, whom you seem to value. She will tell you that your winter castle is now mine. We understand that it may take time for you to meet these conditions. We will mark that time by throwing an Arken body over the wall of my winter castle every hour day and night until all of our conditions are met.'"

All eyes turned to the king.

The king stood there for a long moment inscrutable gazing back at the messenger from Shad-on. Finally, he spoke.

"Return to your master," is all he said.

Dove. They want Dove dead. If I don't succeed, Dove will die. Even if I do, she may die.

I looked up to heaven. "Why did You bring us here?"

When I looked down, Dove was standing in front of me. She was saying something to me, but I don't know what it was, because all I could hear was The Voice.

“The only way out is through. You have everything you need. Now go.”

I don’t know what those words mean to you, but to me, everything suddenly made sense. I was delivered from that car accident in Lansing, Michigan for this moment. This was my moment. Now I turn and face Bill’s dog. Now I stand up to Butch. I now reply to Kristie Novak. I join my brother. If it’s my time to go, it’s my time.

“Find me a horse,” I said to Dove.

“Ah, Straight Arrow...you’re not going to do what I think you’re going to do, are you?”

“Just find me a horse.”

Dove opened her mouth to say something, but then she closed it again. She turned away, and a short time later returned with a horse.

I don’t know if it was Muncher, Muncher 2 or some other horse, but I swung up into the saddle.

“Hand me the case,” I said to Dove.

It was now clear why the bomb had followed us into Arken. It wasn’t meant for the President of the United States. It was meant for someone else.

Dove shook her head.

“Come on, Dove. You know this is what I need to do.”

She looked up at me, and then beyond. Tears started to form, but she nodded, and lifted the case up to me. Then she smiled, and laughed with the tears, running freely down her face.

“Crazy Horse,” she said, “you are a medical miracle.”

For the first time in my life, I understood what she was saying.

“I love you too,” I replied.

And then we were off. I don’t remember telling Muncher to start, but we were in motion—moving faster and faster—far faster than I had ever ridden a horse before. Men shouted as I went by. “Straight Arrow!” I heard men cry.

So this is what it feels like to be the quarterback. I’m glad I went out for debate instead.

Although I always thought it was a little unfair that the football team had cheerleaders, and we had none.

I was almost at the bottom of the hill before I realized something. *I don’t know how to set this bomb.*

I opened the case, but I couldn’t clearly see inside.

I pulled the bomb out. Wires. Some kind of explosive. C4 maybe? A digital timer. Was there a switch? I turned the bomb around. As I did, the case fell away to the ground.

Muncher and I were still riding hard. We flew past the messenger from Goraudok, and started closing that last hundred yards between us and the army. A loose wire. A loose screw. No screwdriver. I used my fingernail.

The timer started up again. Four seconds on the clock.

Arrows flew past me. The poison arrows of Goraudok.

I looked up. Muncher had taken me straight toward my target. There he was—black armor, blood red cape, a foot taller than everyone around him.

Somehow we broke through the lines. Men were charging with swords drawn. Shad-on was thirty yards away.

I threw.

Muncher reared.

I fell backward onto the ground.

A blinding flash. And then stillness.

I lay there on the ground, waiting for death to come to me. But for some reason it didn't.

Okay. This is kinda weird.

Did you ever watch Mythbusters? Remember the time they blew up the cement truck? They filmed it on high speed, and kept watching it over and over again. Well, this was something like that, only it was a frame freeze. There was a ball of light about five feet in diameter above Shad-on. I could see that his armor was beginning to crumple. But he wasn't moving. Nothing was moving. Except me, and Muncher, and...I looked around.

Two people were running down the Hill of Beneger toward me. Dove and the Princess.

Muncher trotted over to them, and I followed. They climbed on, and cantered back toward me. (I believe that's the right term.) We met at the place where the empty case lay on the ground.

Dove was laughing. "You dropped something," she said to me.

I picked up the case.

The princess spoke. "I heard The Voice. We've been given time to disarm the men of Goraudok."

I know what you're thinking. Ten thousand troops. Three people. This is going to take a little while—like a week or a month. But it didn't take that long at all. We took a stack of swords, spears, helmets, crossbows, arrows, knives, and whatever. We loaded it up on Muncher, walked him up the hill, and stacked up the weapons. When we finished another round trip, we

found a hundred times as many weapons stockpiled—to be guarded by the men of Arken.

Someone was helping us.

We finished the task. We checked every Goraudok soldier, knight, bodyguard. Every one was disarmed. We had their knives, their swords, their crossbows, their spears, their battle axes, their helmets—everything.

After we completed our inspection, a man—an African American man—well, I honestly don't know if he was African or American, but he was Black—anyway, he stepped out of nowhere and started talking to us. He was dressed like one of those Middle Earth elves and looked young and old at the same time. He looked like an elf, only not Scandinavian with pointed ears.

He said, “We’re paying a visit to the winter castle. I’ll save you a day’s ride.” The moment he said that, we were standing in the center of the courtyard at the winter castle.

It was dreadful. The people of Arken were chained neck-to-neck or in leg irons. Goraudok soldiers were prodding them with spears and clubs. Some had clearly been beaten. Some elderly persons had collapsed and were being dragged by the other prisoners as the guards beat them.

Our guide spoke. “They can’t see us. They can’t hear us. But I think it’s time to put a stop to this.” Then he added, “In the name of the Most High, sleep.”

When he said that, the Goraudok soldiers crumbled onto the ground, ending up in all sorts of ridiculous poses. Some of them were snoring. All of them were sleeping.

A young girl ran up to Princess Gabriella. “Your Highness,” she said. “You’re back.”

“She’s the only one who can see you,” our guide explained.

Gabriella hugged the girl. “Only for a moment, dear,” she said. “Tell the people that the army of Goraudok has been defeated. Your captors have been put into a deep sleep. The people of Arken are to take the weapons away from these soldiers. If they should awaken, guard them carefully until the king returns.”

The girl turned away, and we were back on the Hill of Beneger, standing near the king and his men who remained frozen in time.

We looked around but our guide was nowhere to be seen.

Dove spoke. “I think our time in Arken has come to an end. There’s something I must do before we leave.” She turned to the princess. “The Gift I have belongs here in Arken. It is meant for the healing of your people. Here, Princess Gabriella. This Gift is yours. I give it to you.”

With that, Dove placed her hands on Gabriella’s head. Gabriella’s face and clothes gleamed with light, and then faded. As that light faded, Dove also faded and disappeared.

Wait a second! “Dove!” I called.

Princess Gabriella stepped over and placed a hand on my arm. The Voice spoke to me one more time, “Dove is okay, My son. She’s back in Wisconsin. You will join her very soon. But wouldn’t you like to collect a few souvenirs before you leave?”

Ah yes. A wonderful idea.

“With your permission, Your Highness,” I said to the princess. “I would like to collect a few things to take with me back to Sun Prairie.”

“Please,” the princess said. “Take anything you wish.”

I picked up the empty bomb case and walked over to the pile of confiscated weapons. I felt like one of those American Pickers set loose in an old barn filled with the kind of stuff you'd take to the Antiques Roadshow. The Goraudok arrowheads were very interesting—now that they weren't shooting them at me—each one was individually handcrafted—not just from iron, but also some from stone, and some from copper or bronze. I just was super careful not to cut myself with them. You never know which ones might be poison. At Gabriella's urging, I even took a few Arken arrowheads. I also found some knives among the Goraudok weapons that had jeweled handles, absolutely beautiful.

The case was full. Good stuff, nice memories, full of commercial possibilities once I get back in the shop—assuming the case comes with me.

“One more thing,” the princess said, reaching behind her neck and taking off a gold necklace that she wore, concealed below her clothing. “Please give this to Dove. A thank you gift from me.”

I took the necklace and set it in the case. “Thank you,” I said, but Princess Gabriella was already starting to fade. I saw a huge flash, heard an explosion, saw people running, and then all went black.

Chapter 20

I awoke to a beeping sound. I was in some kind of bed and a woman was standing over me. She had a name tag. It said Mary. I tried to talk but no sound came out of my mouth. My throat was so dry and sore.

“Water,” I whispered to Mary.

Mary’s voice was businesslike. “I’m sorry, Mr. Arrow. We can’t give you any water. You’ve had a breathing tube down your throat for a couple of days. Your throat’s gonna be dry and sore. (I already knew that.) But you can have some ice chips.”

“Ice chips.” My mouth formed the words but no sound came out.

She put a spoon up to my mouth. Ice. Cool. Delicious.

I tried moving my arms. They were stuck.

“I can’t move my arms,” I whispered.

“Oh, sorry,” Mary said. Let me get that for you.

I heard some velcro rip apart. My hands were free, but one was hooked up to an IV.

“You were trying to rip out your breathing tube, so we had to tie your hands down. Just to keep you safe. No need now. The respiratory therapist was here when we took your tube out about twenty minutes ago. She says you’re breathing on your own just fine.”

“Okay,” I said. Seemed like the right thing to say.

“Do you know where you are?” Mary asked me.

“I’m not sure, but I think I’m in a hospital,” I said.

“That’s right,” she said. “You’re in the Intensive Care Unit of the University Hospital in Madison.”

“Okay,” I whispered again.

“Do you know why you’re here?”

“Poison?” I asked. “Goraudok poison?”

Mary smiled. “I don’t know anything about any poison. You were shot. By the Secret Service. Trying to save the president. You’re on the national news. The video of you running with that bag has gone viral. There’s over 20 million views on YouTube.”

“Is he awake?”

I heard a new voice. It was Dove’s voice.

I don’t know why, but when I heard her voice, I just started crying.

Dove came over and held my hand. She found a Kleenex and wiped the tears away.

“Are we back?” my raspy voice asked her.

“We are,” she said. “We’re in Madison.” She said it with her bright cheerful voice that somehow made everything in the world okay.

Just then a man walked in. He was wearing a white coat and had a name tag on it. Dr. Somebody or another. I don’t remember his name. But he said to me, “Mr. Arrow. You’re awake. You, sir, are a medical miracle.”

I couldn't help it. I started laughing, and I started crying, both at the same time.

"You certainly are," Dove said.

The bullet missed my spine by a whisker, they said. There was damage to some of the big organs, but the surgeons worked on me for a few hours, and patched everything up. They said I was healing nicely. Probably my Indian blood. Or the grace of God. Or both.

I got a really nice handwritten note from the president, thanking me for doing my best to save him, even though there wasn't a bomb in the case. Nope. No bomb. It was just a bunch of arrowheads, a couple knives and a gold necklace. The thief that had masqueraded as a Secret Service Agent had stolen these valuable artifacts from my shop. One of the federal agents recognized him. That's why he dropped the bag and ran.

Dove explained to the police and the Secret Service that I thought the bag was a bomb—that I was only trying to save the president—that I was willing to give up my life to keep him safe. She also explained it to the news reporters, and that's probably why that YouTube video went viral.

The news reporters wanted to talk to me, but I didn't want to talk to them. So the hospital security team kept them away. After I got out, I got a few invitations to appear on some talk shows, but, hey, what would I say? I spent a few weeks in Middle Earth while I was in the ICU for three days?

Before I left the hospital, however, the Secret Service Agent who shot me came to visit me. He apologized, but I said, "No problem." I mean it was just a misunderstanding. These things happen.

We got talking, and he's a really nice guy. I can't tell you his name—they don't like it when I do that, but I can tell you that he's married, and that he and his wife were praying for me. That meant a lot to me.

He also had some interesting news for me. His brother (I found out) is the curator of some kind of museum in Chicago. Anyway, he had his brother take a look at the contents of that bag. He even did some carbon dating. The stuff was over a thousand years old, but it looked like it was brand new. Mint condition. No collection like it in the world.

He wanted to make an offer.

Interesting.

When Dove and I were finally alone in the hospital room, I asked her, "So...Arken. Does that mean anything to you?"

Dove smiled. "Does it mean anything to me? Crazy Horse, it means everything to me. You saved my life."

Wow.

"Do you think we should tell 'em?" I asked her.

Dove shook her head. "I don't think they're ready to hear it."

Me neither.

By the way, in case you're wondering: Yes, I did sell the arrowheads and the knives to the museum. I'm not going into detail on how much I got, but let's just say I won't need to work again for a long, long time—maybe never—if I don't want to. My nephew took over the job at the bowling alley. He said to me, "I love being completely done with work by eight o'clock in the morning." How many people can say that?

Of course, I kept the gold necklace out of the sale and gave it to Dove. It was a gift from the princess, and it wasn't mine to sell.

I still sell arrowheads, though most of the time people just want a tour. They want to see the spot in the fence where I got shot, so I show 'em, and I give 'em my autograph. Of course, I charge ten bucks for the package deal: a tour, an autograph, and an arrowhead. You gotta make a living, you know.

The city fathers are happy. I got rid of my hand painted sign. In its place, I installed one of those plastic thermoformed signs: "Indian Arrowheads." Underneath it says, "The site of the shooting of Straight Arrow who tried to save the President of the United States."

About sixty days after I got out of the hospital, Dove and I visited the museum that now housed the "Straight Arrow Collection." It was quiet there in the middle of a Wednesday afternoon, as we sat on the bench together just taking it all in.

I'm not sure what came over me, but I just leaned over and kissed Dove. Right on the cheek. Wow, is her skin ever soft.

Anyway, I thought I heard The Voice when I did that. It wasn't nearly so loud. Just quiet, but still there.

The Voice said, "Hey, that's my daughter, you're kissing!" But I think He said it with a smile.

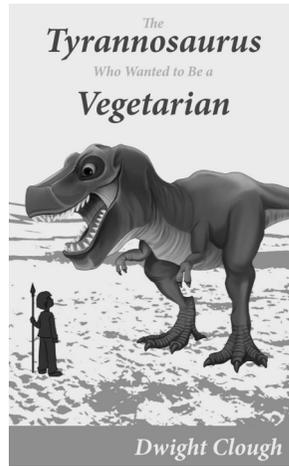
Epilogue

I hope you can help me. I'm looking for an engagement ring. It doesn't need to be a diamond. Rubies are okay too. In a pinch, I'd even consider an emerald. But it needs to be shaped like an arrowhead. I'm having trouble finding just the right one. I'm just putting that out there, in case you might be able to help.

I'm also trying to figure something out.

You probably know by now that Dove is running for president. So I'm wondering, do I pop the question before she gets elected or after?

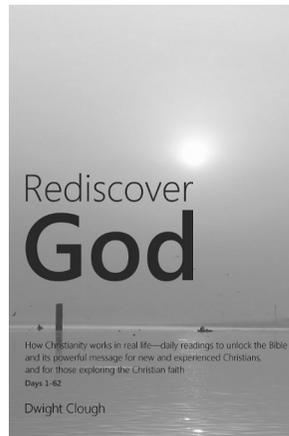
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Never underestimate
the power you have
to change your world.

Let's start by imagining our nation
the day after the election.
Half the people are elated;
their candidate won.
The other half are bitterly disappointed;

their candidate lost.

Is this what we want?

Do we really want to divide our nation
into winners and losers?

Do we really want to force others
to lose

so we can win?

Is that who we are?

I don't think so.

Let's imagine a different outcome.

The election is over,
and everyone is happy,
because every voter wins.

Impossible?

Maybe.

But then again,
maybe not.

It all depends
on whether we're willing to think
outside the box.

What if we woke up tomorrow
and there were no political parties?

No Democrat.

No Republican.

No red state.

No blue state.

No liberal.

No conservative.

What if we were all just people?

What would we discover
about one another?

Suppose we could reboot
without all the baggage in our brains.
Who knows?
We might actually like each other.

Maybe we aren't as far apart
as we think we are.

Three hundred million people
call America home.
There's something wrong with a system
where a presidential election
becomes a choice
of the lesser of two evils.
Instead, it should be
a tough choice
among our favorite leaders.
We should want
to vote for everybody
on the ballot.

Where are those candidates?
Why can't we find them?
And how did we create a system
that divides the country
into winners and losers every election day?
Why can't we all be winners?

Dove for President

Details at DoveforPresident.com

About Dwight Clough

Dwight Clough is a Christian author, online educator and coach, blogger and ghostwriter specializing in personal transformation, Christian life story, inspiration, education and leadership.

The Man from Sun Prairie was inspired by Dwight's wife Kim, who really does help people hear the voice of God in all kinds of creative ways; by his dad Lee, who bought all kinds of crazy things (including arrowheads) from flea markets and attempted to resell them in his ongoing garage sale; and the everyday life of Sun Prairie, a suburb of Madison, and one of the fastest growing communities in Wisconsin.

Dwight & Kim and their children make their home in Sun Prairie not far from Ashley Field. You can read Dwight's blog at EmpowerGood.com or learn about his ghostwriting services at DwightClough.com.